

the develop- ment

john barth

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The Development

John Barth

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BOOKS BY JOHN BARTH

THE FLOATING OPERA

THE END OF THE ROAD

THE SOT-WEED FACTOR

GILES GOAT-BOY

LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE: FICTION FOR

PRINT, TAPE, LIVE VOICE

CHIMERA

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SABBATICAL: A ROMANCE

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FURTHER FRIDAYS: ESSAYS, LECTURES,

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ON WITH THE STORY

COMING SOON!!!

THE BOOK OF TEN NIGHTS AND A NIGHT:

ELEVEN STORIES

WHERE THREE ROADS MEET

THE DEVELOPMENT: NINE STORIES

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents portrayed in it are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author's use of names of actual places or persons living or dead is incidental to the purposes of the plot and not intended to change the entirely fictional character of the work.

Earlier versions of stories in this book first appeared in the following periodicals: "Peeping Tom" and "Assisted Living" in *Subtropics*, Winter/Spring 2006 and Fall 2007; "The Bard Award" in *Zoetrope* 10:1, Spring 2006; "Toga Party" in *Fiction* 20:1, 2006 (reprinted in *The Best American Short Stories 2007*); "Teardown" in *Conjunctions* 47, 2006; "Progressive Dinner" in *New Letters* 73:2, 2007; "The End" in *Mississippi Review* 35:31, 2007; "Us/Them" in *The Hopkins Review* 1.2, Spring 2008. My thanks to Jin Auh and her knowledgeable associates at The Wylie Agency for arranging these initial publications as well as their collection in the present volume; also to Jane Rosenman and Larry Cooper of Houghton Mifflin for seeing this volume through the press. And thanks most of all to my wife, the book's dedicatee, for (among much else) her unerringly on-the-mark editorial suggestions.

For Shelly

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Peeping Tom

DON'T ASK ME (as my wife half teasingly did earlier this morning) who I think is reading or hearing this. My projected history of our Oyster Cove community, and specifically the season of it's Peeping Tom, is barely past the note-gathering stage, and there's nobody here in my study at 1010 Oyster Cove Court except me and my PC, who spend an hour or three together after breakfast and morning stretchies before Margie and I move on to the routine chores and diversions of a comfortably retired American couple in the dawn of the new millennium and the evening of their lives. Maybe our CIA/FBI types have found ways to eavesdrop on any citizen's scribbling? Or maybe some super-shrewd hacker has turned himself into a Listening Tom, the electronic equivalent of Oyster Cove's peeper, even when I'm talking to myself?

Don't ask me (but in that case you wouldn't need to, right?); I just work here. For all I know, "You"—like the subject of this history, in some folks' opinion—may not actually, physically exist. Unlike him, however (and we all assume our P.T., whether real or imagined, to have been a Him, not a Her), you're an invited guest, who- and whatever You are, not an eavesdropper. Welcome aboard, mate, and listen up!

As I was saying, I just work here, more or less between nine and noon most mornings, while Margaret the Indispensable does her ex-businesswoman business in her own workspace upstairs: reviews and adjusts our stock-and-bond accounts and other assets; pays the family bills and balances our checkbook; works the phone to line up service people; schedules our errands and appointments; plans our meals, vacation trips, grandkid visits ... and Next Big Moves.

Which last-mentioned item prompts this whatever-it-is-I'm-doing. Margie and I have pretty much decided (and she'll soon e-mail the news to our middle-aged offspring, who'll be Sad But Relieved to hear it) that what with my ominously increasing memory problems and her near-laming arthritis, the time has come for us to list this pleasant "villa" of ours with a realtor and get ready to get ready to shift across and down the river from good old Heron Bay Estates (of which more presently) to TCI's assisted-living establishment, Bayview Manor.

Even Margie—a professional real-estate agent herself back in our city-house/country-house days, when she worked the suburban D.C. residential market while I taught history to fifth-and sixth-formers at Calvert Heights Country Day School—even Margie rolls her

Chesapeake-green, macularly degenerating eyes at all that developers' lingo. Heron Bay Estates, now approaching the quarter-century mark, was the first large gated-community project of Tidewater Communities, Inc.: a couple thousand acres of former corn and soybean fields, creeper-clogged pine woods, and tidewater wetlands on Maryland's river-veined Eastern Shore. By no means "estates" in any conventional sense of that term, our well-planned and "ecologically sensitive" residential development is subdivided into neighborhoods—some additionally gated, most not—with names like Shad Run and Egret's Crest (low-rise condominiums), Blue Crab Bight (waterfront "coach homes," the developer's euphemism for over-and-under duplexes, with small-boat dockage on the adjacent tidal creek), Rockfish Reach (more of a stretch than a reach, as the only water in sight of that pleasant clutch of mid- to upper-midrange detached houses is a winding tidal creeklet and a water-hazard pond, ringed with cattails, between the tenth and eleventh holes of HBE's golf course, whose Ecological Sensitivity consists of using recycled "gray water" on it's greens and fairways instead of pumping down the water table even further), Spartina Pointe (a couple dozen upscale McMansions, not unhandsome, whose obvious newness so belies the fake-vintage spelling of their reeded land-spit that we mockingly sound it's terminal e: "Spartina Pointey," or "Ye Oldey Spartina Pointey")—and our own Oyster Cove, whose twenty-odd "villas" (on a circular "court" around a landscaped central green with a fountain that spritzes recycled water three seasons of the year) have nothing of the Mediterranean or Floridian that that term implies: In the glossary of HBE and of TCI generally, "villas" are side-by-side two-story duplexes (as distinct from those afore-mentioned "coach homes" on the one hand and detached houses on the other) of first-floor brick and second-floor vinyl clapboard siding, attractively though non-functionally window-shuttered, two-car-garaged, and modestly porched fore and aft, their exterior maintenance and small-lot landscaping managed mainly by our Neighborhood Association rather than by the individual owners. Halfway houses, one might say, between the condos and the detached-house communities.

Indeed, that term applies in several respects. Although a few of us are younger and quite a few of us older but still able, your typical Oyster Cove couple are about halfway between their busy professional peak and their approaching retirement. Most would describe themselves as upper-middle-incomers—an O.C. villa is decidedly *not* low-budget housing—but a few find their mortgage and insurance payments, property taxes, and the Association's stiff maintenance assessments just barely manageable, while a few others have merely camped here until their Spartina Pointe(y) (Mc)Mansions were

landscaped, interior-decorated, and ready for them and their Lexuses, Mercedeses, and golf carts (3.5-car garages are standard in SpPte). An Oyster Cove villa is typically the first second home of a couple like Margie and me fifteen or so years back: empty nesters experimenting with either retirement or a transportable home office while getting the feel of the Heron Bay scene, trying out the golf course and Club, and scouting alternative neighborhoods. The average residency is about ten years, although some folks bounce elsewhere after one or two—up to Spartina Pointe or Rockfish Reach, down to an Egret's Crest condo, more or less sideways to a Blue Crab Bight coach home, or out to some other development in some other location, if not to Bayview Manor or the grave—and a dwindling handful of us old-timers have been here almost since the place was built.

To wind up this little sociogram: The majority of Heron Bay Estaters are White Anglo-Saxon Protestants of one or another denomination, but there are maybe three or four Jewish families, a few more Roman Catholics, and probably a fair number of seculars. (Who knows? Who cares? Firm believers in the separation of church and estate, we don't pry into such matters.) Politically, we're split about evenly between the two major parties. No Asians or African Americans among us yet—not because they're officially excluded (as they would have been fifty years ago, and popular though the adjective "exclusive" remains with outfits like TCI); perhaps because any in those categories with both the means and the inclination to buy into a gated community prefer not to be ethnic-diversity pioneers on the mostly rural and not-all-that-cosmopolitan Eastern Shore.

"Gated": That too is a bit of a stretch in Oyster Cove, and (in Margie's and my opinion, anyhow) an expensive bit of ornamentation for Heron Bay. In a low-crime area whose weekly newspaper's police blotter runs more to underage tobacco and liquor purchases and loud-noise complaints in the nearby county seat than to break-ins and crimes of violence, there's little need for round-the-clock gatekeepers, HBE Resident windshield stickers, phone-ahead clearance for visitors, and routine neighborhood drive-throughs by the white-painted Security car—though it's admittedly a (minor) pleasure not to bother latching doors and windows every time we bicycle over to the Club for tennis or drive into town for medical/dental appointments, a bit of shopping, or dinner. As for the secondary gates at Spartina Pointe, Blue Crab Bight, and Oyster Cove—unmanned (even though some have gatehouses), their swing-gates operated by push-button code and usually closed only at night—pure snobbery, many of us think, or mild paranoia, and a low-grade nuisance, especially on rainycold nights when you don't *want* to roll down your car window and reach out to the lighted control box, or oblige arriving guests (whom you've had to

supply in advance with the four-digit entry code) to do likewise. And both gates—Reader/ Listener take note—screen motor vehicles only: Bicycles and pedestrians come and go freely on the sidewalks, whether the gates are open or shut. Our own Oyster Cove gates, by near-unanimous vote of the Neighborhood Association, have remained open and inoperative for the past dozen years. We use the attractively landscaped little brick gatehouse for storing lawn fertilizer, grass seed, and pavement de-icer for the winter months: a less expensive alternative to removing the whole structure, which anyhow some residents like for its ornamental (or prestige-suggesting) value. Since, as aforementioned, the average O.C. residency is a decade or less, it's only we old-timers who remember actually having used those secondary gates.

But then, it's only we who remember, for better or worse and as best some of us can, when the neighborhood was in its prime: "built out," as they say, after its raw early years of construction and new planting, its trees and shrubbery and flower beds mature, the villas comfortably settled into their sites but not yet showing signs of "deferred maintenance" despite the Association's best efforts to keep things shipshape. Same goes for HBE generally, it's several neighborhoods at first scalped building lots with model homes at comparatively bargain prices, then handsomely full-bloomed and more expensive, then declining a bit here and there (while still final-building on a few acres of former "preserve") as Tidewater Communities, Inc., moved on to newer projects all around the estuary. And likewise, to be sure, for the great Bay itself: inarguably downhill since residential development and agribusiness boomed in the past half-century, with their runoff of nutrients and pollutants and the consequent ecological damage. Ditto our Republic, some would say, and for that matter the world: downhill, at least on balance, despite there having been no world wars lately.

Nor are we-all what we used to be, either.

But this is not about that, exactly. M. and I have quite enjoyed our tenure here at 1010 Oyster Cove Court, our next-to-last home address. Of the half-dozen we've shared in our nearly fifty years of marriage, none has been more agreeable than our "villa" of the past fifteen and sole residence of the past ten, since we gave up straddling the Bay. We've liked our serial neighbors, too: next door in 1008, for example, at the time I'll tell of, Jim and Reba Smythe, right-wingers both, but generous, hospitable, and civic-spirited; he a semiretired, still smoothly handsome investment broker, ardent wildfowl hunter, and all-round gun lover; she an elegant pillar of the Episcopal church and

the county hospital board. On our other side back then, in 1012, lively Matt and Mary ("M&M") Grauer, he a portly and ruddy-faced ex-Methodist minister turned all-purpose private-practice "counselor"; she a chubbily cheerful flower-gardener and baker of irresistible cheesecakes; both of them avid golfers, tireless volunteers, and supporters of worthy, mildly liberal causes. And across the Court in 1011, then as now, our resident philosopher Sam Bailey, recently widowed, alas: a lean and bald and bearded, acerbic but dourly amusing retired professor of something or other at an Eastern Shore branch of the state university, as left of center as the Smythes were right, whose business card reads *Dr. Samuel Bailey, Ph.D., Educational Consultant*—whatever *that* is. Different as we twenty-odd Oyster Cove householders were and are—and never particularly close friends, mind, just amiable neighbors—we've always quite gotten along, pitched in together on community projects (most of us, anyhow: What community doesn't include a couple of standoffish free riders?), and taken active part in OCNA, our neighborhood association. Indeed, for the past twelve years I've served as that outfit's president; it's a post I'll vacate with some regret when the For Sale sign goes up out front. And despite my having been, please remember, a mere history *teacher*, not a historian, I find myself inclined to set down for whomever, before my memory goes kaput altogether, some account of our little community, in particular of what Margie and I consider to have been it's most interesting hour: the summer of the Peeping Tom.

And when was that? Suffice it to say, not many years since. Odd as this may sound from an ex-history teach, the exact dates aren't important. Truth is, I'd rather not be specific, lest some busybody go through the records and think: "Mm-hm: Just after the [So-and-Sos] bought [Twelve-Sixteen, say], which they sold a year later and skipped out to Florida. I *thought* there was something fishy about that pair, him especially. Didn't even play golf!" When in fact the poor guy had advanced emphysema and shifted south to escape our chilly-damp tidewater winters. So let's just say that the time I'll tell of, if I manage to, was well after "Vietnam," but before "Iraq"; more specifically, after desktop and even laptop computers had become commonplace, but before handheld ones came on line; after cordless phones, but before everybody had cellulars; after VCRs, but before DVDs.

Okay? The name's Tim Manning, by the way—and if You've got the kind of eye and ear for such things that Matt Grauer used to have, You'll have noted that in all four of the families thus far introduced, the men are called by one-syllable first names and their wives by two-, with the accent on the first (Sam Bailey's late mate, a rail-thin black-haired beauty until cancer chemotherapy wrecked her, was named Ethel). So? So nothing, I suppose, except maybe bear in mind Dr.

Sam's wise caution that a Pattern—of last names, happenings, whatever—doth not in itself a Meaning make, much as we may be programmed by evolution to see patterns in things, and significance in patterns.

Okay?

Okay. "It all began," as stories so often start (and if I were a storyteller instead of a history-teller, I'd have started this tale right here, like that, instead of where and how I did), late one mid-May evening in 19-whatever: already warm enough here in Chesapeake country to leave windows open until bedtime, but no AC or even ceiling fans needed yet. After cleaning up the dinner dishes, Margie and I had enjoyed a postprandial stroll around Oyster Cove Court, as was and remains our habit, followed by an hour's reading in 1010's living room; then we'd changed into nightclothes and settled down in the villa's family room as usual to spend our waking day's last hour with the telly before our half-past-ten bedtime. At a commercial break in whatever program we were watching, I stepped into the kitchen to pour my regular pale-ale nightcap while Margie went into the adjacent lavatory to pee—and a few moments later I heard her shriek my name. I set down bottle and glass and hurried herward; all but collided with her as she fled the pissoir, tugging up the underpants that she wears under her shortie nightgown on warm end-of-evenings.

"Somebody's *out* there!" In all our years of marriage I'd seldom seen my self-possessed helpmeet so alarmed. "*Looking* at me!"

I flicked off the light and hurried past her to the open lavatory window, near the toilet. Nothing in sight through it's screen except the Leyland cypresses, dimly visible in the streetlight-glow from O.C. Court, between us and the Smythes, which give both houses privacy enough to make closing our first-floor window blinds unnecessary. "Call Security," I said (Heron Bay's main gatehouse); "I'll go have a look outside." Hurried back into the kitchen, grabbed the big flashlight from atop the fridge, and headed for the back door.

"Do you think it's safe to go out there?" Margie worried after me. "In your PJs?"

"Not safe for that snooping bastard," I told her, "if I get my hands on him." Though what exactly I would have done in that unlikely event, I'm not sure: haven't been in a physical scuffle since third grade; never served in the military or had any other form of hand-to-hand-combat training; hope I'm not a coward, but know I'm not the macho sort either. Was maybe a bit surprised myself, not unpleasantly, at my impulsive readiness to go unarmed out into the

night for a possible-though-unlikely confrontation with a prowler. Went anyhow, adrenaline-pumped, through laundry room and garage to night-lighted rear driveway and around to side yard—shining the flashlight prudently ahead to warn of my approach.

No sign of anyone. The night was sweet; the air moist, mild, breezeless, and bug-free. The grassy aisle between those cypresses and our foundation planting of dwarf junipers wasn't the sort to show footprints; nor was the shredded-hardwood mulch around those junipers obviously disturbed under the lavatory window, as far as I could tell. Standing among them, I verified that a six-footer like myself could just see over the shoulder-high sill into the lavatory and (with a bit of neck-craning) over to the toilet area. I shrugged a "Who knows?" or "Nobody in sight" sign to Margie, standing inside there with cordless phone in hand, then stepped back onto the grass and checked with the flashlight to see whether *my* footprints were visible. Couldn't say for certain, but guessed not.

"Well, I damned sure didn't imagine it," Margie said a bit defensively when—having inspected the length of our side of the duplex and as much of the front and rear yards as I could without attracting the neighbors' attention—I was safely back indoors.

"Nobody said you did, hon." I gave her a hug, and to lighten things up added, "Great night for prowling, by the way: no moon or mosquitoes. You called Security?"

"They're sending the patrol car around for an extra check and keeping an eye out for pedestrians leaving the grounds this late in the evening. But they're not armed, and they don't go into people's yards except in emergencies. They offered to call 911 or the sheriff's office for us, but I said we'd call them ourselves if you saw anything suspicious out there. What do we think?"

We considered. What *she'd* seen was certainly suspicious—alarming, even—but was it worth involving the county sheriff and the state police? On the one hand, the prowler might for all we knew have been armed and dangerous, scouting the premises with an eye to Breaking and Entering, as it's called in the crime reports, and been spooked when Margie caught sight of him. On the other hand, he might have been some Oyster Cover out looking for a strayed house pet and mortified to find himself glimpsing Margaret Manning in mid-urination ...

In either case, "A white guy," she affirmed, her pulse and respiration returning to normal as we brushed our teeth and made ready for bed. "No eyeglasses or mustache or beard as far as I could tell, though I couldn't see his face clearly out there through the screen. High forehead but not bald, unless he maybe had some kind of cap on.

It was just a glimpse, you know? Kind of a pale moon-face that popped up and looked in and then ducked and disappeared when he saw I'd seen him and heard me holler for you."

So what did we think? In the end—maybe partly because by then it was past eleven and neither I nor the main-gate security guys (who phoned us after their pass through the neighborhood) had seen anything amiss—we decided not to notify the sheriff's office, much less call the 911 emergency number, until or unless something further turned up. I would take another look around in the morning, and we would definitely alert our neighbors, ask them to pass the word along and keep an eye out.

"Sonofabitch peeps in on my wife," Jim Smythe growled, "I'll blow his damn head off." He had a way, did swarthy Jim, of making those less belligerent than himself seem reprehensible, wimpy: a habit at which Reba, to her credit, rolled her fine brown eyes. Ethel Bailey, on the other hand, was impressed that I'd gone out there alone and unarmed in the dark. She would *never* have let Sam do that, Margie said she'd said—characteristically admiring husbands other than her own while implying that their wives were less appreciative of them than was she. Sam himself good-naturedly questioned my "risk-benefit analysis" while freely admitting that he'd be too chicken to do what I'd done even if he judged it the best course of action, which he didn't. Matt Grauer, too, as fond of proverbs as of patterns, reminded me that discretion is the better part of valor, but jokingly declared himself envious of the Peeping Tom. "Margie on the can!" he teased the two of us. "What an eyeful!" To which his plump Mary added, "If it'd been me, he'd've gotten a different kind of eyeful: I'd've wet my pants." "Not likely," Margie reminded her, "when you've already dropped them to do your business. Anyhow, guys, they don't say 'scared shitless' for nothing: I here report that it applies to Number One as well as Number Two." Whereupon Sam and Matt, our neighborhood eggheads (though only Sam was bald), bemusedly wondered whether the colloquialisms "It scared me shitless" and "It scared the shit out of me" are two ways of describing the same reaction or (understanding the former to mean "It scared me out of shitting" and the latter to mean "It scared me into shitting my pants") descriptions of two opposite, though equally visceral and involuntary, manifestations of fear.

Thus did we banter the disconcerting event toward assimilation, agreeing that the prowler/peeper was in all likelihood a one-time interloper from "outside": some bored, beered-up young redneck, we imagined, of the sort who nightly cruised the shopping-plaza parking lots in their megabass-whumping, NASCAR-stickered jalopies and smashed their empty Coors bottles on the asphalt. Until, less than two weeks later, Becky Gibson (with her husband, Henry, the new owners

of 220 Bivalve Bend, one of several saltily named side streets of Oyster Cove Court) glimpsed a pale face pressed to the glass of their back-porch door as she passed by it en route through their darkened house to turn of a kitchen light inadvertently left on when the couple retired for the night. Like my Margie, she called for her husband; unlike me (but this was, after all, the second such incident), he unhesitatingly dialed 911. Although the responding officer considerably didn't sound his siren at one in the morning, a number of us noticed the patrol car's flashers even through our closed eyelids and bedroom-window curtains. As OCNA's president, I felt it my responsibility to slip as quietly as I could out of bed and into my pajama bottoms (which Margie and I have always slept without, originally for romantic reasons, latterly out of long habit and urinary convenience in our three-pees-a-night old age) and to step outside and see what was what.

Another fine May night, still and moonless. I could see the distant flashers pulsing from somewhere around the corner on Bivalve Bend, but couldn't tell whether they were from one of the county's multipurpose emergency vehicles or a sheriff's patrol car. Not a fire truck, I guessed, or there'd have been sirens. Lest I be mistaken for a prowler myself, I ventured no farther along the curb than the edge of our property, tempting as it was to continue past the next two duplexes to the corner. Other folks were quite possibly looking out their front windows, and anyhow one had to draw some line between being a concerned neighbor and a prying one. As I turned back, I saw the Heron Bay security patrol car—an "environmentally sensitive" hybrid bearing the Blue Heron logo of HBE—turn into Oyster Cove Court through our ever-open gate and head for Bivalve Bend. Rather than hailing or waving it down in my pajamas to ask what was happening, I stepped behind a nearby large boxwood (standard walkway-flanking shrub around our circle) and crouched a bit for better cover until the vehicle hummed past.

"Looks like we have ourselves a problem," all hands agreed next day, after details of the past night's alarm had circulated through the community. Like Margie, silver-curled Becky Gibson could say only that the figure at her back-door window had been a beardless adult white male, either dark-haired or wearing a black bill cap backwards; whether it was the same intruder or another, two Peeping Tom incidents in successive weeks in the same small neighborhood obviously spelled trouble. As had been the case with us, neither the Gibsons nor in this instance the sheriff's deputies had found any trace of the prowler, who'd presumably vanished as soon as he knew himself to have been seen. Mary Grauer, wakened like me by the

reflected flashes, was almost certain she'd seen from their living room window somebody skulking in our joint front-walk shrubbery: probably the Gibsons' peeper beating a retreat from Oyster Cove. I was tempted to explain and laugh it off, but held my tongue lest anyone get the wrong idea. Even to Margie I said only that I'd stepped outside to have a look, not that I'd walked to the curb in my PJs and ducked for cover when Security came by.

The third incident, just two nights later, was less unequivocal than it's forerunners: Reba Smythe, looking from a window just after dark as we all seemed to be doing now with some frequency, *thought* she might have glimpsed a furtive figure in the Baileys' front yard, and phoned to alert them. Her husband hurried over, nine-millimeter pistol in hand, just in time to quite frighten Sam Bailey, who deplored handgun ownership anyhow, as he stepped out to see whether anyone was there. The two men then did a perimeter check together, and found nothing. Reba acknowledged that she might have been mistaken: She'd recently suffered what ophthalmologists term a vitreous separation in her left eye, in consequence of which her vision was pestered by black "floaters" that she sometimes mistook for flying insects or other UFOs, as she liked to call them. But she was equally insistent that she might *not* have been mistaken; she just couldn't say for sure, although whatever she'd seen was certainly larger than her usual dark specks.

At a sort-of-emergency meeting of the Neighborhood Association the following afternoon (at our place, with jug wines and simple hors d'oeuvres), we decided to reactivate the Oyster Cove secondary entrance and exit gates as a warning and possible deterrent, even though our P.T., as we'd begun to call him for short, was pretty clearly a pedestrian. And we would press HBECA, the overall community association, for additional nighttime security patrols, even if that entailed an increase in everyone's annual assessment; for it needed no Matt Grauer to point out that three such incidents constituted an alarming pattern, and while they'd been confined thus far to Oyster Cove, it was to be expected that the peeper might try other Heron Bay venues, particularly now that ours was on a geared-up lookout for him.

As we most certainly were: unpleasantly on edge, but reassuringly drawn together by a common nuisance that, while not yet quite an overt threat, was definitely scary.

"Not a threat?" Mary Grauer protested when I described our problem in those terms. "You don't think we feel threatened when some creep might be peeking at us in the shower?"

Posing like a Jazz Age flapper with her glass of chablis in one hand

and a brie-smear'd cracker in the other, "Speak for yourself, dear," Ethel Bailey teased. "*Some* of us might find it a turn- on."

Less publicly, Matt Grauer and Jim Smythe shared with me the disturbing possibility—just theoretical, mind, not a genuine suspicion yet—that our P.T. might actually be *one of us*: if not an Oyster Cover, maybe some unfortunately perverted resident of an adjacent neighborhood. Or somebody's kinky visiting son, perhaps, or adolescent grandson, out on the prowl unbeknownst to his hosts?

No way to check on that last, really: Nearly all of us being empty-nesters and most of us retirees, there was a constant stream of visiting progeny and out-of-town friends in Heron Bay. But the One of Us hypothesis was reinforced, amusingly though ambiguously, a week or so later, when by early-June full moonlight both Bob and Frieda Olsen (in 1014, on the Grauers' other side from us) spotted a stocky, hatless somebody in dark shorts and shirt crossing stealthily, as it seemed to them, from their backyard into "M&M's." The alarm was quickly passed by telephone from the Olsens to the Grauers to us. We all clicked our backyard lights on, and while Margie rang up the Smythes, we three husbands stepped out back to investigate—and interrupted Jim Smythe, pistol in one hand again and flashlight in the other, completing what he unabashedly declared to us (even as Reba was confirming it by phone to Margie) was the first of the one-man armed patrols of Oyster Cove that he intended to make nightly until either HBECA increased the frequency of it's security rounds or he caught and apprehended our P.T. in the act—or, better yet, gunned the sick bastard down as he fled. Not a ready acknowledger of his mistakes, Jim was dissuaded from this self-appointed mission only by our unanimous protest that it was at best more likely to trigger false alarms than to prevent real ones, and at worst might lead to his shooting some innocent neighbor out stargazing or merely enjoying the spring air. "Yeah, well, all right then," he grudgingly conceded (while Reba, who'd joined us along with our wives, did her signature eye-roll). "But they'd better stay in their own backyard, 'cause anybody I catch mooning around in mine, I intend to plug."

"Gun nuts, I swear," Sam Bailey sighed to me next day, when we shook our heads together over the fellow's presumption and shortsightedness. "Doesn't he realize that if one of *us* happened to be a guy like him, he'd have gotten himself shot last night?"

"Maybe *he's* been the P.T. all along," I ventured—not seriously, really, and none of us cared to tease Jim with that proposition.

Less alarming, if we count the foregoing as Peeper Incident #4, was the one that followed it the very next evening, as reported by it's perpetrator and sole witness, Sam himself, when I happened to walk

out to fetch our morning newspaper of the front walk at the same time as he, the pair of us still in robe and slippers before breakfast and Sam wearing the French beret that he'd affected ever since teaching a Fulbright year in Nanterre three decades past. "So at nine last night Ethel turns on one of those TV sitcoms that I can't stand, okay?" he tells me. "So I step into the library," as the Baileys like to call their book-lined living room, "to read for an hour till bedtime, and I catch sight of some movement just outside the picture window," which, flanked by smaller double-hung windows, overlooks the front yard, the street, and the commons beyond in all Oyster Cove Court villas. "So I cross the room to check it out—in my robe and PJs, same as now?—and the guy comes at me from out there on the porch as I come at him from inside, and I'm thinking, Isn't *he* a brazen bastard, and traipsing around there in his nightclothes too! Until I realize it's my own reflection I'm looking at. So I stand there contemplating myself in the picture window and feeling foolish while my pulse calms down, and then I experiment a bit with different lights on and of—table lamps, reading lamps, the track lights over the bookshelves—to see how a person inside might be fooled by his own reflection in different amounts of light from different angles. Because it's occurring to me that our Peeping Tom might be not only *one* of us, but *each* one of us who's seen him. In short"—he touched his beret—"Monsieur Voyeur, *c'est moi*."

Nonsense, all hands agreed when Sam's report and theory made the rounds: What had so alarmed Margie at our bathroom window and Becky Gibson at her back door had been a youngish, medium-built man, not the reflection of a gracefully aging though less-thin-than-she-used-to-be woman. And it was Jim Smythe on his reckless neighborhood patrol that the Olsens had spotted behind 1014, not Bob and Frieda's joint reflection.

"On the other hand," Ethel Bailey pretended to consider seriously, squinting over-shoulder at her husband, "that beret of Sam's *could* be mistaken in the dark for a backwards bill cap, *n'est-ce pas*? Do you suppose our Oyster Cove pervert might turn out to be the guy I've been sharing a bed with for forty-three years?" Come to think of it, though, she added, the ladies' P.T. had been *sans* eyeglasses, and Doc Sam couldn't find his own weenie without his bifocals. No fun being a voyeur if you can't see what you're peeping at!

"Seriously though, people," Sam bade us consider while all this was being reviewed, with edgy jocularly, at our next OCNA meeting. "Granted that what the Olsens saw was our pistol-packing Jim-boy, and that whatever Margie and Becky saw, it wasn't *literally* their own reflection. Same with these new reports from Blue Crab Bight and Rockfish Reach ..." in both of which neighborhoods by then, one

resident had reported a peeper/prowler sighting to the HBE Community Association.

"They're just jealous of us Oyster Cove women getting all the attention," Reba Smythe joked, to her husband's nonamusement.

"Better pickings over there, d'you suppose?" Matt Grauer pretended to wonder—and added, despite Mary's punching his shoulder, "Guess I'll have to give it a try some night."

"What *I* worry," Jim Smythe here growled, "is we might have a copycat thing going: other guys taking their cue from our guy."

Ethel Bailey tried to make light of this disturbing suggestion: "Another Heron Bay amenity, maybe? One peeper for each neighborhood, on a rotating basis, so we don't have to undress for the same creep week after week?" But a palpable *frisson* of alarm, among the women especially, went through the room.

With a gratified smile, "You're all making my point for me," Doc Sam declared.

"Your *pointey*," I couldn't resist correcting, and felt Margie's elbow in my ribs. "P-O-I-N-T-E, as they spell it up the road."

But there was a nervousness in our joking. He was not maintaining, Sam went on in his mildly lectorial fashion, that every one of these half-dozen or so sightings had literally been the sighter's own reflection, although his own experience demonstrated that at least one of them had been and raised the possibility that some others might have been too, it being a well-established principle of perceptual psychology that people tend to see what they expect to see. No: All he meant was that to some extent, at least, the P.T. might be—might *embody*, *represent*, whatever—a projection of our own fears, needs, desires. "Like God," he concluded, turning up his palms and looking ceilingward, "in the opinion of some of us, anyhow."

"Objection," objected Matt Grauer, and Sam said, "Sorry there, Reverend."

"Are you suggesting," Becky Gibson protested, "that we *want* to be peeped at on the potty? Speak for yourself, neighbor!"

More edgy chuckles. Sam grinned and shrugged; his wife declared, "I don't know about you-all, but I've taken to checking my hair and makeup before I undress, just in case."

But scoff though we might at Sam's "projection" theory, at least some of us (myself included) had to acknowledge that for Jim Smythe, say, the P.T. could be said to have addressed a macho inclination to which Jim welcomely responded—as perhaps, changes changed, had been the case with Ethel Bailey's touch of exhibitionism. And we were, as a neighborhood, agreeably more bonded by our common concern than we had been before (or would be after), the way a community

might become during an extended power outage, say, or by sharing cleanup chores after a damaging storm. Thanks to our Peeping Tom, we were coming to know one another better, our sundry strengths and shortcomings, and to appreciate the former while accepting the latter. Matt Grauer might tend to pontificate and Sam Bailey to lecture, but their minds were sharp, their opinions not to be taken lightly. Jim Smythe was a bit of a bully, and narrow-minded, but a man to be counted on when push came to shove. Ethel Bailey was a flirt and a tease, but she had put her finger on an undeniably heightened self-consciousness in all of us—perhaps especially, though not merely, in the Oyster Cove wives—as we went about our after-dark domestic routines. And when some days later, for example, it was reported that a fellow from over in Egret's Crest, upon spotting or believing he'd spotted a face at the bathroom window of his first-floor condo as he zipped his fly after urination, had unzipped it again, fished out his penis, marched to the by-then-dark window saying "*Eat me, cocksucker!*" and afterward boasted openly of having done so, his account told us little about the interloper (assuming that there had in fact been one) and rather much about the interlopee, if that's the right word.

For all our shared concern and heightened community spirit, however, by July of that summer we Heron Bay Estaters could be said to be divided into a sizable majority of "Peeping Tommers" on the one hand (those who believed that one or more prowlers, probably from Outside but not impossibly one of our own residents, was sneak-peeking into our domiciles) and a minority of Doubting Thomases, convinced that at least a significant percentage of the reported incidents were false alarms; that, as Sam Bailey memorably put it, we had come collectively to resemble an oversensitive smoke alarm, triggered as readily by a kitchen stove burner or a dinner-table candle as by a bona fide blaze. My wife was among the true believers—not surprisingly, inasmuch as her initial "sighting experience" (Sam's term, assigning our P.T. to the same ontological category as UFOs) had started the whole sequence. I myself was sympathetic both to her conviction and to Sam's "projection" theory in its modified and expanded version set forth above—in support of which I here recount for the very first time, to whoever You are, the next Oyster Cove Peeper Incident, known heretofore not even to Margie, only to Yours Truly.

Hesitation. Deep breath. Resolve to Tell All, trusting You to accept that Tim Manning is not, was never, the P.T. per se. But ...:

On a muggy tidewater night toward that month's end, while Margie watched the ten o'clock TV news headlines from Baltimore, I stepped out front to admire a planetarium sky with a thin slice of new

moon setting over by the gatehouse, off to westward, from where also flickered occasional sheet lightning from an isolated thunderstorm across the Chesapeake. Although our windows were closed and our AC on against the subtropical temperatures, the night air had begun to cool a bit and dew to form on everything, sparkly in the streetlamp light. In short, an inviting night, it's southwest breeze pleasant on my bare arms and legs (not this time in my usual after-nine pajamas, I happened to be still wearing the shorts and T-shirt that I'd donned for dinner after my end-of-afternoon shower). No problem with mosquitoes: The Association sprays all of Heron Bay Estates regularly, to the tut-tuts of the ecologically sensitive but the relief of us who enjoy gardening, backyard barbecues, and the out-of-doors generally. Time was, as I may have mentioned, when the two of us and others would take an after-dark stroll around Oyster Cove Court, to stretch our legs a bit before turning in for the night. Since the advent of the Peeping Tom, however, that pleasant practice had all but ceased, despite Jim Smythe's reasonable urging of it as a deterrent; one didn't want to be mistaken for the P.T., and most would prefer not to encounter him in mid-peep, lest he turn out to be not only real but armed and dangerous.

So I had the Court to myself, as it were—or believed I did, until I thought I saw some movement in the corridor between Sam and Ethel's 1011 and the villa to it's right. A little flash of light it was, actually, I realized when I turned my head that way, which to my peripheral vision had looked like someone maybe ducking for cover over there, but which I saw now to be either the shadow of movement from inside one of the Baileys' lighted windows or else light from that window on some breeze-stirred foliage outside. More and more of us, as the P.T. incidents persisted, had taken to keeping all blinds and draperies closed after sunset; it was unusual to see light streaming from an uncurtained window of what was evidently an occupied room—the Baileys' main bathroom, in fact, by my reckoning, our Oyster Cove floor plans being pretty much identical. It occurred to me then to check our own bathroom window, to make certain that with it's venetian blinds fully lowered and closed nothing could be seen—through some remaining slit at the sill, for example, or at the edges of the slats. Creepy as it felt to be spying on oneself, so to speak, I was able to verify that nothing could be seen in there except that the light was on; no doubt Margie making ready for bed.

What must it be like, I couldn't help wondering, to be that sicko bastard snooping on unsuspecting people as they washed their crotches and wiped their asses? I found myself—I'm tempted to say *watched* myself—returning to the street and strolling as if casually across the Court toward that light from 1011, assuring myself that in

good-neighborly fashion I was making certain that nothing was amiss over there, but at the same time realizing, with a thrill of dismay, that what I might really be about to do was ...

Wearing only her underpants, slim Ethel Bailey stood at her bathroom window, facing it's curtained and unlighted counterpart across the shrubberied aisle in 1013 (it's floor plan the mirror image of 1011's). Eyes closed, thin lips mischievously smiling, head turned aside like an ancient-Egyptian profile and chin out-thrust in amused, faux-modest challenge, she cupped her small breasts in her hands as if in presentation and swiveled her upper torso slightly from side to side, the better to display them. As I watched from behind a small cypress, she then slid one hand down across her flat belly and into the front of her jay-blue undies, moved it around inside there, and twitched her pelvis as if to the beat of some silent music. Turned herself hind-to; flexed and unflexed her skinny buttocks practically on the windowsill as she worked her panties down! Hot-faced with appall at both of us, I beat as hasty a retreat as prudence allowed. Was relieved indeed to see no one else out enjoying the night air. Hoped to Christ Jim Smythe wasn't checking for prowlers from his front window.

Already in bed, sitting propped against it's king-size headboard and working her Sunday *Times* crossword puzzle while she waited for me to join her, "Where've you been?" Margie asked, in a tone of mock-petulant amusement, when I came in. "Out peeping on the neighbors?"

"Nobody out there worth peeping at," I declared as lightly as I could manage, and moved past her to the bathroom to hide my flushed face. "All the hot stuff's right here in Ten-Ten."

"Yes, well," she called back—playfully, to my immeasurable relief. "It is a bit sticky in here. Maybe turn the ceiling fan on when you come back in?"

I did, having undressed, washed up, brushed teeth, peed (uncomfortably conscious of the window virtually at my elbow), and donned a short-sleeved pajama top—and found that Margie had already shed hers and set aside her puzzle, expectantly. At that period of our lives, we Mannings still made love at least a couple of times a week (the so-clinical phrase "had sex" was not in as general use back then as nowadays, and never between ourselves), most often in the mornings, but also and usually more ardently at bedtime or even on a foul-weather weekend afternoon. That night, as the low-speed overhead fan moved light air over our skin and I was simultaneously stirred and shamed by the un-expungeable image of Sam Bailey's naked wife, we came together more passionately than we had done for some while. Entwined with her then in spent contentment, guilty-conscienced but enormously grateful for our happy and after-all-

faithful marriage, I wondered briefly—and unjealously—whom my wife might have been fantasizing as *her* lover while we two went at it.

But "Wow," she murmured in drowsy languor. "That night sky of yours must've been some turn-on. You'll have to try it more often." "You're my turn-on," I assured her—dutifully, guiltily, but nonetheless sincerely as we disconnected our satisfied bodies and turned to sleep.

And there You pretty much have it, make of it what You will. Relieved both as self-appointed chronicler and as a prevailingly moral man to put that discreditable aberration behind me, I wish I could follow it now with a proper dramatic climax and denouement to this account of the Oyster Cove Peeping Tom: Some rascally local teenager, say, or migrant worker, is caught red-handed (red-eyed?) in the disgusting act and turned over to the Authorities, unless gunned down *in flagrante delicto* by Jim Smythe or some other Oyster Cover, several of whom had seen fit to arm themselves as the sightings multiplied. Or better yet, for dramatic effect if not for neighborhood comity, the P.T. turns out indeed to have been one of us, who then swears he was only keeping an eye out for prowlers, but fails to convince a fair number of us despite his mortified wife's indignant and increasingly desperate defense of him. More or less ostracized, the couple list their villa for sale, move somewhere down south or out west, and divorce soon after.

Et cetera. But what You're winding up here, if You happen to exist, is a history, not a Story, and it's "ending" is no duly gratifying Resolution nor even a capital-E Ending, really, just a sort of petering out, like most folks' lives. No further Oyster Cove P.T. sightings reported after July, and only one more from elsewhere in Heron Bay Estates—from an *arriviste* couple just settling into their brand-new Spartina Pointey mansion and, who knows, maybe wanting in on the action? The late-summer Atlantic hurricane season preempted our attention as usual; perhaps one of it's serial dock-swamping, tree-limb-cracking near misses blew or washed the creep away? Life in the community reverted to normal: New neighbors moved in, replacing others moving up, down, sideways, or out. Kitchens and bathrooms were remodeled, whole villas renovated, older cars traded in for new. Grand children were born (never on grandparental location, and often thousands of American miles away); their parents—our grownup children—divorced or didn't, remarried or didn't, succeeded or failed in their careers or just muddled through. Old Oyster Covers got older, faltered, died—Ethel Bailey among them, rendered leaner yet in her terminal season by metastasized cervical cancer and it's vain attendant therapies; Jim Smythe too, felled by a stroke when Democrats won the

White House in '92. We re-deactivated our secondary security gates, and some of us resumed our evening *paseos* around the Court. Already by Halloween of the year I tell of, the P.T. had become little more than a slightly nervous neighborhood joke: "Peekaboo! I see you!" By Thanksgiving, the OCNA membership bowed heads in near unison (the outspokenly atheist Sam Bailey scowling straight ahead as always) while ex-Reverend Matt Grauer gave our collective thanks that that minor menace, or peace-disturbing figment, had evidently passed.

"I can't help wondering," Mary Grauer declared just a month or so ago, when something or other reminded her and Margie of the Good Old Days, "whether that's because there's nothing in Oyster Cove these days for a self-respecting pervert to get off on. Who wants an eyeful of *us*?"

Her husband loyally raised his hand, but then with a wink acknowledged that the likeliest candidates for voyeuring the current femmes of Oyster Cove Court were the geezers of TCI's Bayview Manor, were it not too long a round-trip haul for their motorized wheelchairs. Margie and I exchanged a glance: We had just about decided to make our "B.M. Move," as we'd come to call it between ourselves, but hadn't announced our decision yet.

"You know what?" my wife said then to the four of us (Sam Bailey having joined our Friday evening Old Farts Happy Hour in 1010's family room, with cheesecake provided by Mary Grauer). "Sometimes I almost *miss* having that sicko around. What does that say about Margaret Manning?"

"That she enjoyed being sixty," Sam volunteered, "more than she enjoys being seventy-plus? Or that for a while there we were more of a neighborhood than before or since? Life in Oyster Cove got to be almost *interesting*, Ethel liked to say."

"I *do* sort of miss those days," Margie said again to me at that evening's end, as we clicked off the TV and room lights and made our way bedward. "Remember how we'd go at it some nights after you came in from checking outside?"

Replied I (if I remember correctly), "I do indeed," and gave her backside a friendly pat.

Indeed I do.

Toga Party

IF "DOC SAM" BAILEY —Dick Felton's longtime tennis buddy from over in Oyster Cove—were telling this toga party story, the old ex-professor would most likely have kicked it off with one of those lefty-liberal rants that he used to lay on his Heron Bay friends and neighbors at the drop of any hat. We can hear Sam now, going "Know what I think, guys? I think that if *you* think that the twentieth century was a goddamn horror show—two catastrophic world wars plus Korea and Vietnam plus assorted multimillion-victim genocides, purges, and pandemics plus the Cold War's three-decade threat of nuclear apocalypse plus whatever other goodies I'm forgetting to mention—then you ain't seen nothing yet, pals, 'cause the twenty-first is gonna be worse: no 'infidel' city safe from jihadist nuking, 'resource wars' for oil and water as China and India get ever more prosperous and supplies run out, the ruin of the planet by overpopulation, the collapse of America's economy when the dollar-bubble bursts, and right here in Heron Bay Estates the sea level's rising from global warming even as I speak, while the peninsula sinks under our feet and the hurricane season gets worse every year. So really, I mean: What the fuck? Just as well for us Golden Agers that we're on our last legs anyhow, worrying how our kids and grandkids will manage when the shit really hits the fan, but also relieved that we won't be around to see it happen. Am I right?"

Yes, well, Sam: If you say so, as you so often did. And Dick and Susan Felton would agree further (what they could imagine their friend adding at this point) that for the fragile present, despite all the foregoing, we Heron Bay Estaters and others like us from sea to ever-less-shining sea are extraordinarily fortune-favored folks (although the situation could change radically for the worse before the close of this parenthesis): respectable careers behind us; most of us in stable marriages and reasonably good health for our age (a few widows and widowers, Doc Sam included at the time we tell of; a few disabled, more or less, and/or ailing from cancer, Parkinson's, MS, stroke, late-onset diabetes, early-stage Alzheimer's, what have you); our children mostly middle-aged and married, with children of their own, pursuing their own careers all over the Republic; ourselves comfortably pensioned, enjoying what pleasures we can while we're still able—golf and tennis and travel, bridge games and gardening and other hobbies, visits to and from those kids and grandkids, entertaining friends and neighbors and being by them entertained with drinks and hors d'oeuvres and sometimes dinner at one another's houses or some

restaurant up in nearby Stratford—and hosting or attending the occasional party.

There now: We've arrived at our subject, and since Sam Bailey's *not* the one in charge of this story, we can start it where it started for the Feltons: the late-summer Saturday when Dick stepped out before breakfast as usual in his PJs, robe, and slippers to fetch the morning newspaper from the end of their driveway and found rubber-banded to their mailbox flag (as would sundry other residents of Rockfish Reach to theirs, so he could see by looking up and down their bend of Shoreside Drive) an elaborate computer-graphic invitation to attend Tom and Patsy Hardison's *TOGA PARTY!!!* two weeks hence, on "Saturnsday, XXIV Septembris," to inaugurate their just-built house at 12 Loblolly Court, one of several "keyholes" making of the Drive.

"Toga party?" Dick asked his wife over breakfast. The house computer geek among her other talents, between coffee sips and spoonfuls of blueberry-topped granola Susan was admiring the artwork on the Hardisons' invitation: ancient-Roman-looking wild-party frescoes scanned from somewhere and color-printed as background to the text. "What's a toga party, please?"

"Frat-house stuff, I'd guess," she supposed. "Like in that crazy *Animal House* movie from whenever? Everybody dressing up like for a whatchacallum ..." Pointing to the fresco shot: "Saturnalia?"

"Good try," Doc Sam would grant her two weeks later, at the party. "Especially since today is quote 'Saturnsday.' But those any-thing-goes Saturnalia in ancient Rome were celebrated in December, so I guess Bacchanalia's the word we want—after the wine god Bacchus? And the singular would be bacchanal." Since Sam wasn't breakfasting with the Feltons, however, Dick replied that he didn't know beans about Saturnalia and animal houses, and went back to leafing through the *Baltimore Sun*.

"So are we going?" Sue wanted to know. "We're supposed to RSVP by this weekend."

"Your call," her husband said or requested, adding that as far as he knew, their calendar was clear for "Saturnsday, XXIV Septembris." But the Feltons of 1020 Shoreside Drive, he needn't remind her, while not recluses, weren't particularly social animals, either, compared to most of their Rockfish Reach neighborhood and, for that matter, the Heron Bay Estates development generally, to which they'd moved year-round half a dozen years back, after Dick's retirement from his upper-midlevel-management post in Baltimore and Susan's from her office-administration job at her alma mater, Goucher College. To the best of his recollection, moreover, their wardrobes were toga-free.

His wife's guess was that any wraparound bed sheet kind of thing

would do the trick. She would computer-search "toga party" after breakfast, she declared; her bet was that there'd be a clutch of websites on the subject. "It's all just *fun*, for pity's sake! And when was the last time we went to a neighborhood party? Plus I'd really like to see the inside of that house of theirs. Wouldn't you?"

Yeah, well, her husband supposed so. Sure.

That less-than-eager agreement earned him one of Sue's see-me-being-patient? looks: eyes raised ceilingward, tongue checked between right-side molars. Susan Felton was a half-dozen years younger than Richard—not enough to matter much in her late sixties and his mid-seventies, after forty-some years of marriage—but except for work he inclined to be the more passive partner, content to follow his wife's lead in most matters. Over the past year or two, though, as he'd approached and then attained the three-quarter-century mark, he had by his own acknowledgment become rather stick-in-the-muddish, not so much *depressed* by the prospect of their imminent old age as *subdued* by it, dezested, his get up and go all but gotten up and gone, as he had observed to be the case with others at his age and stage (though by no means all) among their limited social acquaintance.

In sum (he readily granted whenever he and Sue spoke of this subject, as lately they'd found themselves doing more often than formerly), the chap had yet to come to terms with his fast-running mortal span: the inevitable downsizing from the house and grounds and motorboat and cars that they'd taken years of pleasure in; the physical and mental deterioration that lay ahead for them; the burden of caregiving through their decline; the unimaginable loss of life-partner ... The prospect of his merely ceasing to exist, he would want it understood, did not in itself much trouble him. He and Sue had enjoyed a good life indeed, all in all. If their family was less close than some that they knew and envied, neither was it dysfunctional: Cordially Affectionate is how they would describe the prevailing tone of their relations with their grown-up kids and growing-up grandkids; they could wish it better, but were gratified that it wasn't worse, like some others they knew. No catastrophes in their life story thus far: Dick had required bypass surgery in his mid-sixties, and Sue an ovariectomy and left-breast lumpectomy in her mid-menopause. Both had had cataracts removed, and Dick had some macular degeneration—luckily of the less aggressive, "dry" variety—and mild hearing loss in his left ear, as well as being constitutionally overweight despite periodic attempts at dieting. Other than those, no serious problems in any life department, and a quite satisfying *curriculum vita* for each of them. More and more often recently, Richard Felton found himself wishing that somewhere down the road they could just push a button and make themselves and their abundant possessions simply disappear

—*poof!*—the latter transformed into equitably distributed checks in the mail to their heirs, with love ...

These cheerless reflections had been center-staged lately by the business that he readdressed at his desk after breakfast: the periodic review of his and Susan's Last Will and Testament. Following his routine midyear update of their computer-spreadsheet Estate Statement, and another, linked to it, that Susan had designed for estimating the distribution of those assets under the current provisions of their wills, it was Dick's biennial autumn custom, in even-numbered years, to review these benefactions, then to call to Sue's attention any that struck him as having become perhaps larger or smaller than they ought to be and to suggest appropriate percentage adjustments, as well as the addition or deletion of beneficiaries in the light of changed circumstances or priorities since the previous go-round: Susan's dear old all-girls prep school, e.g., had lately closed its doors for keeps, so there went Article D of Item Fifth in her will, which bequeathed to it three percent of her Net Residual Estate after funeral costs, executors' fees, estate taxes, and other expenses. Should she perhaps reassign that bequest to the Avon County Public Library, of which she and Dick made frequent use? Estate lawyers' fees being what they were, they tried to limit such emendations to codicil size, if possible, instead of will-redrafting size. But whatever the satisfaction of keeping their affairs in order, it was not a cheery chore (in odd-numbered-year autumns, to spread out the morbidity, they reviewed and updated their separate Letters to Their Executors). The deaths in the year just past of Sam Bailey's so-lively wife, Ethel (cervical cancer), and of their own daughter Katie's father-in-law out in Colorado (aneurysm)—a fellow not even Dick's age, the administration of whose comparatively simple estate had nevertheless been an extended headache for Katie's husband—contributed to the poignancy of the current year's review. Apart from the dreadful prospect of personal bereavement (poor old Sam!), he had looked in vain for ways to minimize further the postmortem burden on their grown-up daughter and son, whom they most certainly loved, but to whom alas in recent years they'd grown less than ideally close both personally and geographically. Dick couldn't imagine, frankly, how he would survive without his beloved and indispensable Susan: less well than Sam Bailey without Ethel, for sure, whose lawyer son and CPA daughter-in-law lived and worked in Stratford, attentively monitored the old fellow's situation and condition, and frequently included him in family activities.

For her part, Susan often declared that the day Dick died would be the last of her own life as well, although by what means she'd end it, she hadn't yet worked out. Dick Junior and Katie and their spouses would just have to put their own lives on hold, fly in from Chicago

and Seattle, and pick up the pieces. Let them hate her for it if they chose to; she wouldn't be around to know it, and they'd be getting a tidy sum for their trouble. "So," she proposed perkily when the couple reconvened at morning's end to make lunch and plan their afternoon. "Let's eat, drink, and be merry at the Hardisons' on X-X-I-V Septembris, since tomorrow et cetera?"

"Easy enough to say," her grave-spirited spouse replied. "But whenever I hear it said, I wonder how anybody could have an appetite for their Last Supper." On the other hand, he acknowledged, here they were, as yet not dead, disabled, or devastated, like the city of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina just a week or so since: No reason why they *shouldn't* go to the party, he supposed—if they could figure out what to wear.

Over sandwiches and diet iced tea on their waterside screened porch, facing the narrow tidal creek of Rockfish Reach agleam in end-of-summer sunshine, "No problem," Sue reported. She'd been on the Web, where a Google search of "toga party" turned up no fewer than 266,000 entries; the first three or four were enough to convince her that anything they improvised would suffice. It was, as she'd suspected, an old fraternity-house thing, made popular among now-middle-aged baby boomers by John Belushi's 1978 film *Animal House*. One could make or buy online "Roman" costumes as elaborate as any in such movies as *Ben-Hur* and *Gladiator*, or simply go the bed-sheet-and-sandals route that she mentioned before. Leave it to her; she'd come up with something. Meanwhile, could they be a little less gloom-and-doomy, for pity's sake, and count their blessings?

Her husband thanked her wholeheartedly for taking charge of the matter, and promised her and himself to try to brighten up a bit and make the most of whatever quality time remained to them.

Which amounted (he then honored his promise by *not* going on to say), with luck, to maybe a dozen years. No computer-adept like his wife, Dick nonetheless had his own desktop machine in his study, on which, between his more serious morning desk chores, it had occurred to him to do a little Web search himself. "Life expectancy," entered and clicked, had turned up nearly fourteen *million* entries (more than a lifetime's worth of reading, he'd bet), among the first half-dozen of which was a questionnaire-calculator—age, ethnicity, personal and family medical histories, etc.—that, once he'd completed it, predicted his "median quartile" age at death to be 89.02 years. In (very!) short, fourteen to go, barring accident, although of course it could turn out to be more or fewer.

Only a dozen or so Septembers left. How assimilate it? On the one hand, the period between birth and age fourteen had seemed to him of

epochal extent, and that between fourteen and twenty-eight scarcely less so: nonexistence to adolescence! Adolescence to maturity, marriage, and parenthood! But his thirties, forties, and fifties had passed more swiftly decade by decade, no doubt because his adult life-changes were fewer and more gradual than those of his youth. And his early sixties—when he'd begun the gradual reduction of his office workload and the leisurely search for a weekend retreat somewhere on Maryland's Eastern Shore that could be upgraded to a year-round residence at his and Sue's retirement—seemed the day before yesterday instead of twelve-plus years ago.

So: Maybe fourteen years left—and who knew how many of those would be healthy and active? Eat, drink, and be merry, indeed! About what?

Well, for starters, about not being a wiped-out refugee from the storm-blasted Gulf Coast, obviously, or a starving, gang-raped young African mother in Darfur. "God's only excuse is that He doesn't exist," Sam Bailey liked to quote some famous person as having said (Oscar Wilde? Bertrand Russell? Don't ask Dick Felton, who anyhow regarded it as a pretty lame excuse). But here they were, he and his long-beloved, on a warm and gorgeous mid-September afternoon in an attractive and well-maintained neighborhood on a branch of a creek of a river of a bay luckily untouched (so far) by that year's busier-than-ever Atlantic hurricane season; their lawn and garden and crape myrtles flourishing; their outboard runabout, like themselves, good for a few more spins before haul-out time; their immediately pending decisions nothing more mattersome than whether to run a few errands in Stratford or do some outdoor chores on the property before Sue's golf and Dick's tennis dates scheduled for later in the day.

So they would go to the goddamn party, as Dick scolded himself for terming it out of Susan's hearing. Some hours later, at a break in whacking the yellow Wilson tennis balls back to Sam Bailey on the Heron Bay Club's courts (since Ethel's death, Sam had lost interest in playing for points, but he still enjoyed a vigorous hour's worth of back-and-forthing a couple of times a week, which had come to suit Dick just fine), he mentioned the upcoming event: that it would be his and Sue's first toga party, and that they'd be going more to have a look at their new neighbors' Loblolly Court mansion and get to know it's owners than out of any interest in funny-costume parties. To his mild surprise, he learned that Sam—although an Oyster Cover rather than a Rockfish Reacher—would be there too, and was in fact looking forward to "XXIV Septembris." As a longtime board member of the Club, Sam had met Tom and Patsy Hardison when they'd applied for membership, even before commencing their house construction. And while he himself at age eighty could do without the faux-Roman high

jinks, his Ethel had relished such foolery and would have loved nothing more than another toga party, if the goddamn nonexistent Almighty hadn't gifted her with goddamn cancer.

They resumed their volleying, until Sam's right arm and shoulder had had enough and the area behind Dick's breastbone began to feel the mild soreness-after-exertion that he hadn't yet mentioned either to Susan or to their doctor, although he'd been noticing it for some months. He *had* shared with both his life partner and his tennis partner his opinion that an ideal way to "go" would be by a sudden massive coronary on the tennis court upon his returning one of Sam's tricky backhand slices with a wham-o forehand topspin. "Don't you *dare* die first!" his wife had warned him. All Sam had said was "Make sure we get a half-hour's tennis in before you kick."

"So tell me about toga parties," Dick asked him as they packed up their racquets and balls, latched the chain-link entrance gate behind themselves, and swigged water from the drinking fountain beside the tennis court restrooms. "What kind of high jinks should we expect?"

The usual, Sam supposed: like calling out something in Latin when you first step into the room ...

"Latin? I don't know any damn Latin!"

"Sure you do: *Ave Maria? Tempus fugit?* After that, and some joking around about all the crazy getups, it's just a friendly cocktail-dinner party for the next couple hours, till they wind it up with some kinky contest-games with fun prizes. Susan will enjoy it; maybe even you will. *Veni, vidi, vici!*"

"Excuse me?"

"You're excused. But *go*, for Christ's sake. Or Jove's sake, whoever's." Thumbing his shrunken chest, "*I'm* going, goddamn it, even though the twenty-fourth is the first anniversary of Ethel's death. I promised her and the kids that I'd try to maintain the status quo as best I could for at least a year—no major changes, one foot in front of the other, et cetera—and then we'd see what we'd see. So I'm going for her sake as much as mine. There're two more passwords for you, by the way: *status quo* and *et cetera*."

Remarkable guy, the Feltons agreed at that afternoon's end, over gin and tonics on the little barbecue patio beside their screened porch. In Dick's opinion, at least, that no-major-changes-for-at-least-the-first-year policy made good sense: Keep everything as familiar and routine as possible while the shock of bereavement was so raw and overwhelming.

But "Count me out," said Sue. "Twenty-four hours tops, and then it's So long, Susie-Q. But what I *really* want is the Common Disaster scenario, thanks"—a term they'd picked up from their estate lawyer

over in the city, who in the course of this latest revision of their wills had urged them to include a new estate-tax-saving gimmick that neither of them quite understood, although they quite trusted the woman's professional advice. Their wills had formerly stipulated that in the event of their dying together (as in a plane crash or other "common disaster"), in circumstances such that it could not be determined which of them predeceased the other, it would be presumed that Dick died before Susan, and their wills would be executed in that order, he leaving the bulk of his estate to her, and she passing it on to their children and other assorted beneficiaries. But inasmuch as virtually all their assets—cars, house, bank accounts, securities portfolio—were jointly owned (contrary to the advice of their lawyer, who had recommended such tax-saving devices as bypass trusts and separate bank and stock accounts, not to the Feltons' taste), the Common Disaster provision had been amended in both wills to read that "each will be presumed to have survived the other." It would save their heirs a bundle, they'd been assured, but to Dick and Sue it sounded like Alice in Wonderland logic. How could each of them be presumed to have survived the other?

"Remind me to ask Sam that at the party, okay? And if he doesn't know, he can ask his lawyer son for us."

And so to the party they-all went, come "XXIV Septembris," despite the unending, anti-festive news reports from the Louisiana coast: the old city of New Orleans, after escaping much of the expected wind damage from Hurricane Katrina, all but destroyed by it's levee-busting storm surge and consequent flooding; and now Hurricane Rita tearing up the coastal towns of Mississippi even as the Feltons made their way, along with other invitees, to the Hardisons'. The evening being overcast, breezy, and cool compared to that week's earlier Indian-summer weather, they opted reluctantly to drive instead of walk the little way from 1020 Shoreside Drive to 12 Loblolly Court—no more than three city blocks, although Heron Bay Estates wasn't laid out in blocks—rather than wear cumbersome outer wraps over their costumes. The decision to go once made, Dick had done his best to get into the spirit of the thing, and was not displeased with what they'd improvised together: for him, leather sandals, a brown-and-white-striped Moroccan caftan picked up as a souvenir ten years earlier on a Mediterranean cruise that had made a stop in Tangier, and on his balding gray head a plastic laurel wreath that Susan had found in the party-stuff aisle of their Stratford supermarket. Plus a silk-robe belt (meant to be a drapery tieback) on which he'd hung a Jamaican machete in it's decoratively tooled leather sheath, the implement

acquired on a Caribbean vacation longer ago than the caftan. Okay, not exactly ancient Roman, but sufficiently oddball exotic—and the caesars' empire, as they recalled, had in fact extended to North Africa: Antony and Cleopatra, *et cetera*. As for Sue, in their joint opinion she looked Cleopatralike in her artfully folded and tucked bed sheet (a suggestion from the Web, with detailed instructions on how to fold and wrap), belted like her husband's caftan with a drapery tieback to match his, her feet similarly sandaled, and on her head a sleek black costume-wig from that same supermarket aisle, with a tiara halo of silver-foil stars.

Carefully, so as not to muss their outfits, they climbed into her Toyota Solara convertible, its top raised against the evening chill (his car was a VW Passat wagon, although both vehicles were titled jointly)—and got no farther than halfway to Loblolly Court before they had to park it and walk the remaining distance anyhow, such was the crowd of earlier-arrived sedans, vans, and SUVs lining the road, their owners either already at the party or, like the Feltons, strolling their costumed way toward #12.

"Would you look at that?" Dick said when they turned into the tree-lined keyhole drive at the head whereof shone the Hardisons' mega-McMansion: not a neo-Georgian or plantation-style manor like it's similarly new and upscale neighbors, but a great rambling beige stucco affair—terra-cotta-tiled roof, great arched windows flanked by spiraled pilasters—resplendent with lights inside and out, including floodlit trees and shrubbery, it's *palazzo* design more suited in the Feltons' opinion to Venice or booming south Florida than to Maryland's Eastern Shore. "How'd it get past Heron Bay's house-plan police?" Meaning the Community Association's Design Review Board, whose okay was required on all building and landscaping proposals. Susan's guess was that Tidewater Communities, Inc., the developer of Heron Bay Estates and other projects on both shores of the Chesapeake, might have jiggered it through in hopes of attracting more million-dollar-house builders to HBE's several high-end detached-home neighborhoods, like Spartina Pointe. She too thought the thing conspicuously out of place in Rockfish Reach, but "You know what they say," she declared: "*De gustibus non est disputandum*"—her chosen party password, which she was pleased to have remembered from prep school days. "Is that the Gibsons ahead of us?"

It was, Dick could affirm when the couple—she bed-sheet-toga'd like Susan, but less appealingly, given her considerable heft; he wearing what looked like a white hospital gown set off by some sort of gladiator thing around his waist and hips—passed under a pair of tall floodlit pines flanking the entrance walkway: Hank and Becky Gibson, Oyster Covers like Sam Bailey, whom the Feltons knew only

casually from the Club, Hank being the golfer and Becky the tennis player in their household.

"*Et tu, Brute!*" Sue called out (she really had been doing her homework; that "Bru-tay" phrase sounded familiar, but Dick couldn't place it). The Gibsons turned, laughed, waved, and waited; the foursome then joked and teased their way up the stone walk beside the "Eurocobble" driveway to #12's massive, porte-cochèred main entrance: a two-tiered platform with three wide, curved concrete steps up to the first marble-tiled landing, and another three to the second, where one of the tall, glass-paned, dark-wood-paneled double doors stood open and a slender, trim-toga'd woman, presumably their hostess, was greeting and admitting several other arrivals.

"A miniskirted toga?" Hank Gibson wondered aloud, for while the costume's thin white top had a fold-and-wrap toga look to it, below the elaborately figured multipaneled belt were a short white pleated skirt and sandal lacings entwined fetchingly almost to her knees. "*Amo amas amat!*" he then called ahead. The couple just entering turned and laughed, as did the hostess. Then Sam Bailey—whom the Feltons now saw stationed just inside the door, in a white terry-cloth robe of the sort provided in better-grade hotel rooms, belted with what appeared to be an army-surplus cartridge belt and topped with a defoliated wreath that looked a bit like Jesus' crown of thorns—called back, "*Amamus amatis amant!*" and gestured them to enter.

Their sleek-featured hostess—more Cleopatran even than Sue, with her short, straight, glossy dark hair encircled by a black metal serpent-band, it's asplike head rising from her brow as if to strike—turned her gleaming smile to them and extended her hand, first to Susan. "Hi! I'm Patsy Hardison. And you are?"

"Sue and Dick Felton," Sue responded, "from around the bend at Ten-Twenty Shoreside? What a beautiful approach to your house!"

"And a house to match it," Dick added, taking her hand in turn.

"I love your costumes!" their hostess exclaimed politely. "So *imaginative!* I know we've seen each other at the Club, but Tom and I are still sorting out names and faces and addresses, so please bear with us." As other arrivals were gathering behind them, she explained to all hands that after calling out their passwords to Sam Bailey, whom she and Tom had appointed to be their Centurion at the Gate, they would find nametags on a table in the foyer, just beyond which her husband would show them the way to the refreshments. "Passwords, please? Loud and clear for all to hear!"

"*De gustibus non est disputandum!*" Sue duly proclaimed, hoping her hosts wouldn't take that proverb as any sort of criticism. Dick followed with "*Ad infinitum!*"—adding, in a lower voice to Sam, who waved

them in, "or *ad nauseam*, whatever. Cool outfit there, Sam."

"The Decline and Fall of the You Know What," their friend explained, and kissed Sue's cheeks. "Aren't *you* the femme fatale tonight, excuse my French. Ethel would've loved that getup."

"I can't *believe* she's not in the next room!" Sue said, hugging him. "Sipping champagne and nibbling hors d'oeuvres!"

"Same here," the old fellow admitted, his voice weakening, until he turned his head aside, stroked his thin white beard, and cleared his throat. "But she couldn't make it tonight, alas. So *carpe diem*, guys."

Although they weren't certain of the Latin, it's general sense was clear enough. They patted his shoulder, moved on to the nametag table on one side of the marble-floored, high-ceilinged entry hall, found and applied their elegantly lettered and alphabetically ordered stick-on labels, and were greeted at the main living room step-down by their host, a buff and hearty-looking chap in his late fifties or early sixties wearing a red-maned silver helmet, a Caesars Palace T-shirt from Las Vegas, a metallic gladiator skirt over knee-length white Bermuda shorts, and leather sandals even higher-laced than his wife's on his dark-haired, well-muscled legs. With an exaggeratedly elaborate kiss of Susan's hand and a vise-hard squeeze of Dick's, "*Dick and Susan Felton!*" he announced to the room beyond and below, having scanned their name stickers. "Welcome to our humble abode!"

"Some humble," Dick said, his tone clearly Impressed, and Sue added, "It's *magnificent!*"

As indeed it was: the enormous, lofty-ceilinged living room (What must it cost to heat that space in the winter months? Dick wondered), it's great sliding glass doors open to a large, roofed and screened terrace ("Lanai," Susan would later correct him), beyond which a yet larger pool/patio area extended, tastefully landscaped and floodlit, toward the tidal covelet where the Hardisons' trawler yacht was docked. A suitably toga'd pianist tinkled away at the grand piano in one corner of the multi-couched and -cocktail-tabled room; out on the lanai a laureled bartender filled glasses while a minitoga'd, similarly wreathed young woman moved among the guests with platters of hors d'oeuvres.

"Great neighborhood, too," Dick added, drawing Sue down the step so that their host could greet the next arrivals. "We know you'll like living here."

With a measured affability, "Oh, well," Tom Hardison responded. "Pat and I don't actually *live* here, but we do enjoy cruising over from Annapolis on weekends and holidays. Y'all go grab yourselves a drink now, and we'll chat some more later, before the fun starts, okay?"

"Aye-aye, *sir*," Dick murmured to Susan as they dutifully moved on.

"Quite a little weekend hideaway!"

She too was more or less rolling her eyes. "But they seem like a friendly enough couple. I wonder where the money comes from."

From their husband-and-wife law firm over in the state capital, one of their costumed neighbors informed them as they waited together at the bar: Hardison & Hardison, very in with the governor and other influential Annapolitans. What was more, they had just taken on their son, Tom Junior, as a full partner, and his younger sister, just out of law school, as a junior partner: sort of a family 4-H Club. And had the Feltons seen the name of that boat of theirs?

"Not yet."

"Stroll out and take a look." To the bartender: "Scotch on the rocks for me, please."

Susan: "White wine spritzer?" And Dick: "I'll have a glass of red."

The barman smiled apologetically. "No reds, I'm afraid. On account of the carpets?" And shrugged: not *his* house rule.

"Mm-hm." The living room wall-to-wall, they now noted, was a gray so light as to be almost white. Poor choice for a carpet color, in Sue's opinion—and for that matter, what color *wouldn't* be stained by a spilled merlot or cabernet? But *de gustibus, de gustibus*. "So make it gin and tonic, then," Dick supposed.

"*Ars longa!*" a late-arriving guest called from the hallway.

Sam Bailey, behind them, asked the bartender for the same, predicted that that new arrival was George Newett, from the College, and called back "*Vita brevis est!*" His own *vita* without Ethel, however, he added to the Feltons, had gotten *longa* than he wanted it to be. Raising his glass in salute, "Fuck life. But here we are, I guess. *E pluribus unum*. Shall we join Trimalchio's Feast?"

The allusion escaped them, but to make room for other thirsters they moved away from the bar, drinks in hand, toward the groups of guests chatting at the hors d'oeuvres tables at the lanai's other end, and out on the pool deck, and in what Susan now dubbed the Great Room. As Sam had foretold, once the admission ritual was done, the affair settled into an agreeable Heron Bay neighborhood cocktail party, lavish by the standards of Rock-fish Reach and Oyster Cove if perhaps not by those of Spartina Pointe, and enlivened by the guests' comments on one another's costumes, which ranged from the more or less aggressively non-compliant (the bearded fellow identified by Doc Sam as "George Newett from the College" wore a camouflage hunting jacket over blue jeans, polo shirt, and Adidas walking shoes; his wife an African dashiki), to the meant-to-be-humorous, like Tom Hardison's casino T-shirt and Dick Felton's caftan-cum-machete, to the formally elaborate, like Patricia Hardison's and some others' store-bought togas

or gladiator outfits. Although not, by their own acknowledgment, particularly "people" people, husband and wife found it a pleasant change from their customary routines to chat in that handsome setting with their neighbors and other acquaintances and to meet acquaintances of those acquaintances; to refresh their drinks and nibble at canapés as they asked and were asked about one another's health, their former or current careers, their grown children's whereabouts and professions, their impression of "houses like this" in "neighborhoods like ours," their opinion of the Bush administration's war in Iraq (careful stepping here, unless one didn't mind treading on toes), and their guesses on whether Chesapeake Bay, in places still recovering from the surge floods of Tropical Storm Isabel two years past, might yet be hurricaned in the current hyperactive season.

"Just heard that Rita's blowing the bejesus out of Gulfport and Biloxi. I swear."

"Anybody want to bet they'll use up the alphabet this year and have to start over? Hurricane Aaron? Tropical Storm Bibi?"

"As in B. B. King?"

"C. C. Ryder? Dee Dee Myers?"

"Who's that?"

"E. E. Cummings?"

"Who's *that*?"

"I can't get over those poor bastards in New Orleans: Why didn't they get the hell out instead of hanging around and looting stores?"

"Did you hear the one about Bush's reply when a reporter asked his opinion of *Roe versus Wade*? 'I don't care how they get out of New Orleans,' says W, 'as long as it doesn't cost the government money.'"

"*George Newett*, is it? At my age, I wish *everybody* wore nametags."

"On their foreheads. Even our grandkids."

"Love that headband, by the way, Pat. Right out of *Antony and Cleopatra*!"

"Why, thanks, Susan. Tom's orders are that if some joker says I've got my head up my *asp*, I should tell them to kiss it. Now is that nice?"

"Some cool djellaba you've got there, Dick."

"Caftan, actually. Some cool yacht you've got out there! Is that your RV too, the big shiny guy parked down by your dock?"

It was, Tom Hardison readily acknowledged. In simple truth, he and Pat enjoyed *owning* things. Owning and doing! "What the hell, you only get one go-round."

George Newett's wife (also from the College, and with a last name different from her husband's) explained to Susan, who had asked about Sam Bailey's earlier reference, that Trimalchio's Feast is a

famous scene in the first-century *Satyricon* of Petronius Arbiter: an over-the-top gluttonous orgy that became a sort of emblem of the Roman Empire's decadence. "The mother of all toga parties, I guess. But talk about over the top ..." She eye-rolled the sumptuous setting in which they stood. The two women agreed, however, that Patricia Hardison really did seem to be, in the best sense, *patrician*: upscale but good-humored, friendly, and without affectation; competent and self-assured but nowise overbearing; as Amanda Todd (i.e., Mrs. George Newett, poet and professor, from Blue Crab Bight) put it, superior, but not capital-S Superior.

"I like her," Susan reported to her husband when they next crossed paths in their separate conversational courses. "First poet I ever met. Is her husband nice?"

Dick shrugged. "Retired from the College. Describes himself as a failed-old-fart writer. But at least he's not intimidating."

"Unlike ...?"

Her husband nodded toward their host, who was just then proclaiming to the assembled "friends, Romans, countrymen" that the dinner buffet (under a large tent out beside the pool deck) was now open for business, and that Jove helps those who help themselves. "After dinner, game and prize time!"

En route past them toward the bar, "Me," Sam Bailey said, "I'm going to have me another G and T. D'ja see their boat's name? Bit of a mouthful, huh?"

Sue hadn't. She worried aloud that Doc Sam was overdoing the booze, maybe on account of his wife's death-day anniversary; hoped he wouldn't be driving home after the party. "I doubt if he cares," Dick said. "I sure wouldn't, in his position." The name of the boat, by the way, he added, was *Plaintiff's Complaint*. Which reminded him: Since both Hardisons were lawyers, maybe he'd ask Emperor Tom about that "each survives the other" business in their wills, and Sue could ask her new pal Cleopatra. Or was it Sheba?

"Come on," his wife chided. "They're friendly people who just happen to be rich as shit. Let's do the buffet."

They did it, Sue chatting in her lively/friendly way with the people before and after them in the help-yourself line and with the caterers who sliced and served the roast beef au jus and breast of turkey; Dick less forthcoming, as had lately more and more become his manner, but not uncordial, and appreciative of his mate's carrying the conversational ball. Time was when they'd both been more outgoing: In their forties and fifties they'd had fairly close *friends*, of the sort one enjoys going out with to a restaurant or movie. By age sixty, after a couple of career moves, they had only office lunch-colleagues, and

since their retirement not even those; just cordial over-the-fence-chat neighbors, golf/ tennis partners, and their seldom more than annually visited or visiting offspring. A somewhat empty life, he'd grant, but one which, as afore-established, they enjoyed more than not, on balance—or *had* enjoyed, until his late brooding upon it's inevitably approaching decline, even collapse, had leached the pleasure out of it.

So "I'll fetch us another glass of wine," he said when they'd claimed two vacant places at one of the several long tables set up under the tent. And added in a mutter, "Wish they had some *red* to go with this beef."

"Shh. Mostly club soda in mine, please." Then "Hi," she greeted the younger couple now seating themselves in the folding chairs across from theirs: "Dick and Sue Felton, from down the road."

"Judy and Joe Barnes," the man of them replied as they scanned one another's nametags: "Blue Crab Bight." He extended his hand first to seated Susan and then to Dick, who briefly clasped it before saying "Going for a refill; back in a minute."

Speaking for him, "Can he bring you-all anything?" Sue offered. "While he's at it?"

They were okay, thanks. He ought to have thought of that himself, Dick supposed, although he'd've needed a tray or something to carry four glasses. Anyhow, screw it. Screw it, screw it, screw it.

Some while later, after they'd fed themselves while exchanging get-acquainted pleasantries with the Barneses—Sue and Judy about the various neighborhoods of Heron Bay Estates, Dick and Joe about the effects of global warming on the Atlantic hurricane season and the ballooning national deficit's impact on the stock market (Joe worked in the Stratford office of a Baltimore investment-counseling firm)—"Aren't *you* the life of the party," Susan half teased, half chided her husband, who on both of those weighty questions had opposed Joe Barnes's guardedly optimistic view with his own much darker one. The two couples were now on their feet again, as were most of the other guests, and circulating from tent to pool deck and lanai.

"Really sorry about that, hon." As in fact he was, and promised her and himself to try to be more "up." For in truth he had enjoyed meeting and talking with the Barneses, and had had a good postdinner conversation with young Joe out by the pool while Susan and Judy visited the WC—"on the jolly subject of that Common Disaster provision in our wills."

"You didn't."

"Sure did—because *he* happened to mention that his clients often

review their estate statements with him so he can help coordinate their investment strategies with their estate lawyer's advice, to reduce inheritance taxes and such."

"O joy."

"So naturally I asked him whether he'd heard of that 'each survives the other' business, and he not only knew right off what I was talking about but explained it simply and clearly, which Betsy Furman—their estate lawyer—"never managed to do." What it came down to, he explained in turn to not-awfully-interested Susan, was that should they die "simultaneously," their jointly owned assets would be divided fifty-fifty, one half passing by the terms of his will, as if he had outlived her, and the other half by hers, as if she'd outlived him. "So you make us up another computer spreadsheet along those lines, and we can estimate each beneficiary's take."

"O very joy." But she would do that, she agreed, ASAP—and she appreciated his finally clarifying that little mystery. Nor had she herself, she would have him know, been talking only girly stuff: When Pat Hardison had happened to speak of "her house" and "Tom's boat," upon Sue's questioning their hostess had explained that like most people she knew, the Hardisons titled their assets separately, for "death tax" reasons: Their Annapolis place was in Tom's name, this Stratford one in hers; same with the boat and the RV, the Lexus and the Cadillac Escalade, their various bank accounts and securities holdings. So much more practical, taxwise: Why give your hard-earned assets to the government instead of to your children? Weren't Sue and her husband set up that way?

"I had to tell her I wasn't sure, that that was your department. But my impression is that everything we own is in both our names, right? Are we being stupid?"

Any estate lawyer would likely think so, Dick acknowledged. Betsy Furman had certainly encouraged bypass trusts, and had inserted that "each survives the other" business into their wills as the next best thing after he'd told her that they were uncomfortable with any arrangement other than joint ownership, which was how they'd done things since Day One of their marriage. He was no canny CPA or estate lawyer or investment geek, one of those types who tell you it's foolish to pay of your mortgage instead of claiming the interest payments as a tax deduction. Probably they knew what they were talking about, but it was over his head and not his and Susan's style. "If the kids and grandkids and the rest get less of the loot that way than they'd get otherwise, they're still getting plenty. Who gives a shit?" What he really cared about, he reminded her, was not their death, much less it's payoff to their heirs, but their Last Age and their

dying. It required the pair of them in good health to maintain their Heron Bay house and grounds and the modest Baltimore condo that they'd bought as a city retreat when they'd retired, sold their dear old townhouse, and made Stratford their principal address. The day either of them joined the ranks of the more than temporarily incapacitated would be the end of life as they knew and enjoyed it; neither of them was cut out for long-term caregiving or caregetting. A Common Disaster, preferably out of the blue while they were still functioning, was the best imaginable scenario for The End: Let them "each survive the other" technically, but neither survive the other in fact—even if that meant making the necessary arrangements themselves.

"My big bundle of joy," Susan said, sighing, and hugged him to put a stop to this lately-so-familiar disquisition.

"Sorry sorry sorry, doll. Let's go refill."

"Hey, look at the lovebirds!" Sam Bailey hollered, too loudly, across the deck from the lanai bar. The old fellow was pretty obviously overindulging. A few people paused in their conversation to glance his way, a few others to smile at the Feltons or raise eyebrows at the old fellow's rowdiness. By way of covering it, perhaps, Tom Hardison, who happened to be standing not far from Sam, gave him a comradely pat on the shoulder and then strode behind the bar, fetched out a beribboned brass bugle, of all things, that he'd evidently stashed there, blew a single loud blast like an amplified, extended fart, and called "Game and prize time, everybody!" The "Great Room" pianist underscored the announcement with a fortissimo fanfare. When all hands were silent and listening, perky Pat Hardison, holding a brown beer bottle as if it were a portable microphone, repeated her husband's earlier "Friends, Romans, countrymen," politically correcting that last term to *countryfolk*, "lend me your ears!"

"You want to borrow our *rears*?" Sam Bailey asked loudly.

"We've got those covered, Sam," the host smoothly replied; he too now sported a beer-bottle mike in one hand, while with the other placing the bugle bell-down on his interrupter's head, to the guests' approving chuckles. "Or maybe I should say *uncovered*, since tonight's Special Olympics consist of Thong-Undie Quoits for the ladies, out on the pool deck, and for the gents, Bobbing for Grapes wherever you see them, as you very soon will. I'll be refereeing the quoits"—he held up a handful of bikini briefs for all to see—"and Pat'll oversee the grapes, which every lady is invited to grab a bunch of and invite the bobber of her choice to bob for."

"Here's how it's done, girls," Pat explained. Out of the large bowl of dark grapes the bartender had produced from behind his station, she plucked a bunch and nestled it neatly into her cleavage. "You tuck 'em

in like so, and then your significant other, or whoever, sees how many he can nibble off their stems—without using his hands, mind. The couple with the fewest grapes left wins the prize." Turning to her husband: "Want a no-grope grape, sweetie-pie?"

"Yummy! Deal me in!" Doing his helmet, he shmushed his face into his wife's fruited bosom and made loud chomping sounds while she, with a mock what-are-you-going-to-do-with-men? look at the laughing bystanders, uplifted her breasts with both hands to facilitate his gorging, and one of the hors d'oeuvre servers began circulating with the bowl among the female guests. A number of them joined in; as many others declined, whether because (like Susan's) their costumes were non-décolletaged, or they preferred watching the fun to joining it, or chose the quoits contest instead. More disposed to spectate than to participate, the Feltons moved with others out to the far side of the pool deck to see how Thong-Undie Quoits was played. Tom Hardison, his grape-bobbing done for the present ("But save me a few for later!" he called back to Patricia), led the way, carrying a white plastic bin full of varicolored thong panties in his left hand while twirling one with his right. On the lawn just past the deck, a shrubby light illumined a slightly tipped-back sheet of plywood, on the white-painted face of which were mounted five distinctly phallic-looking posts, one at each corner and one in the center: six-inch tan shafts culminating in pink knobs and mounted at a suggestively upward angle to the backboard.

"Here's how it's done, ladies," Tom explained; "not that you didn't learn the facts of life back in junior high ..." Holding up a robin's-egg-blue underpant by it's thong, from behind a white-taped line on the deck he frisbeed it the eight feet or so toward the target board, where it landed between pegs and slid to the ground. With a shrug he said, "Not everybody scores on the first date," and then explained to the waiting contestants, "Three pairs for each gladiatrix, okay? If you miss all three, you're still a virgin, no matter how many kids and grandkids you claim to have. Score one and you get to keep it to excite your hubby. Two out of three and you're in the semifinals; *three* out of three and you're a finalist. All three on the same post and you win the Heron Bay Marital Fidelity Award! Who wants to go first?" Examining the nametag on one middle-aged matron's ample, grapeless bosom, "*Helen McCall*," he announced, "*Spartina Pointe*. How about it, Helen?"

The lady gamely handed her wineglass to her neighbor, pulled three panties from the bin, called out "We who are about to *try* salute you!" and spun the first item boardward, where it fell two feet short. "Out of practice," she admitted. Amid the bystanders' chuckles and calls of encouragement she tossed her second, which reached the board but then slid down, as had the host's demonstration throw.

Somebody called, "Not everybody who drops her drawers gets what she's after," to which someone else retorted, "Is that the Voice of Experience speaking?" But Ms. McCall's vigorous third toss looped a red thong undie on the board's upper left peg, to general cheers. Tom Hardison retrieved and presented it with a courtly bow to the contestant's applauding husband, who promptly knelt before her, spread the waistband wide, and insisted that she step into her trophy then and there.

"What fun." Susan sighed and took Dick's hand in hers. "I wish we were more like that."

"Yeah, well, me too." With a squeeze, "In our next life, maybe?" He glanced at his watch: almost nine already. "Want to hang around a while longer, or split now?"

Incredulously, "Are you *kidding*? They haven't awarded the prizes yet!"

"Sorry sorry sorry." And he was, for having become such a party-pooing partner to the wife he so loved and respected. And it wasn't that he was having an unenjoyable evening; only that—as was typically the case on the infrequent occasions when they dined out with another couple—he reached his sufficiency of good food and company sooner than Susan and the others did, and was ready to move on to the next thing, to call it an evening, while the rest were leisurely reviewing the dessert menu and considering an after-dinner nightcap at one or the other's house. To his own surprise, he felt his throat thicken and his eyes brim. Their good life together had gone by so fast! How many more so-agreeably-routine days and evenings remained to them before ... what?

Trying as usual to accommodate him, "D'you want to watch the game," Sue asked him, "or circulate a bit?"

"Your call." His characteristic reply. In an effort to do better, "Why not have a go at the game yourself?" he proposed to her. "You'd look cute in a thong."

She gave him one of her looks. "Because I'm *me*, remember?" Another fifteen minutes or so, she predicted, ought to wind things up, gamewise; after the prizes were handed out they could probably leave without seeming discourteous. Meanwhile, shouldn't he maybe go check on Doc Sam?

Her husband welcomed the errand: something to occupy him while Susan made conversation with their hostess, a couple of her golf partners, and other party guests. He worked his way barward through the merry grape-bobbers, their equally merry encouragers and referees ("How many left down there? Let me check." "No, me!" "Hey hey, no hands allowed ..."), and the occasional two or three talking politics,

sports, business. Couldn't immediately locate his tennis pal, in whose present position he himself would ... well, what, exactly? Not hang around to *be* in that position, he hoped and more or less re-vowed to himself. Then he heard the old fellow (but who was Dick Felton, at age five-and-seventy, to call eighty "old"?) sing out raucously from the living room, to the tune of "Oh Holy Night":

"O-O-Oh ho-ly shit! ..."

Sam stumbled out onto the lanai, doing the beer-bottle-microphone thing as the Hardisons had done earlier, but swigging from it between shouted lines:

"The sky, the sky is fall-ing! ..."

Smiling or frowning people turned his way, some commenting behind their hands.

"It is the end ... of our dear ... U-S-A! ..."

Dick approached him, calling out as if in jest, "Yo, Sam! You're distracting the thong-throwers, man!"

"And the grape-gropers, too!" someone merrily added. Thinking to lead him back inside and quiet him down, Dick put an arm around the old fellow's bony shoulders. He caught sight of Pat Hardison, clearly much concerned, heading toward them from the food tent. But as he made to turn his friend houseward, Sam startled him by snatching the machete from its sheath, pushing free of its owner, raising it high, and declaring, "If there's no red wine, I guess I'll have a bloody mary."

"Sam Sam Sam ..."

Returning to his carol parody, "*Fall ... on your swords!*" Sam sang. "*Oh hear ... the angels laugh-ing! ...*"

Too late, Dick sprang to snatch back the blade, or at least to grab hold of its wielder's arm. To all hands' horror, having mock-threatened his would-be restrainer with it, Sam thrust its point into his own chest, just under the breastbone. Dropped the beer bottle; gripped the machete's carved handle with both hands and pushed its blade into himself yet farther; grunted with the pain of it and dropped first to his knees, then sideways to the floor, his blood already soaking through his robe front onto the lanai deck. Pat Hardison and other women screamed; men shouted and rushed up, her husband among them. An elderly ex-doctor from Stratford—whose "toga" was a fancied-up set of blue hospital scrubs and who earlier had complained to the Feltons that the ever-higher cost of medical malpractice insurance had pressured him into retirement—pushed through the others and took charge: ordered Tom Hardison to dial 911 and Pat to find a bunch of clean rags, towels, anything that he could use to stanch the blood flow; swatted Sam's hands off the machete handle (all but unconscious now, eyes squint shut, the old fellow moaned,

coughed, vomited a bit onto the deck, and went entirely limp); withdrew and laid aside the bloody blade and pressed a double handful of the patient's robe against the gushing wound.

"Bailey, you idiot!" he scolded. "What'd you do *that* for?"

Without opening his eyes, Sam weakly finished his song: "*It was the night ... that my dear ... Ethel died ...*"

"We should call his son in Stratford," Sue said, clutching her husband tearfully.

"Right you are." Dick fished under his caftan for the cell phone that he almost never used but had gotten into the habit of carrying with him. "Where's a goddamn phone book?"

Pat hurried inside to fetch one. "Tell him to go straight to the Avon Health Center!" the doctor called after her.

Men led their sobbing mates away. A couple of hardy volunteers applied clean rags to the blood and vomit puddled on the deck; one considerably wiped clean the machete and restored it to its owner when Dick returned outside from making the grim call to Sam Junior.

"Jesus," Dick said, but gingerly resheathed the thing. The EMS ambulance presently wailed up, lights flashing; its crew transferred the barely breathing victim from floor to stretcher to entranceway gurney to vehicle without (Susan managed to notice) spilling a drop of his plentifully flowing blood onto the carpeting. The ex-doctor—*Mike Bowling*, his nametag read, *Spartina Pte*—on familiar terms with the emergency crew from his years of medical practice, rode with them, instructing his wife to pick him up at AHC in half an hour or so. The Feltons then hurried to their car to follow the ambulance to the hospital, promising the Hardisons (who of course had their hands full with the party's sudden, unexpected finale and the postparty cleanup) that they would phone them a report on Sam's condition as soon as they had one.

"I can't believe he'll live," Sue worried aloud en route the several miles into Stratford, the pair of them feeling ridiculous indeed to be approaching the hospital's emergency wing in their outlandish costumes. "So much blood lost!"

"Better for him if he doesn't," in Dick's opinion. The sheathed machete, at least, he left in the convertible, cursing himself for having included it in his getup but agreeing with Susan that in Sam's desperate and drunken grief he'd have found some other implement to attack himself with, if not at the party, then back at his house in Oyster Cove. Their headdresses, too, and any other removable "Roman" accessories, they divested before crossing the parking lot and making their way into the brightly lit ER lobby. The few staff people they saw did a creditable job of keeping straight faces; the visitor

check-in lady even said sympathetically, "Y'all must've been at that party with Doctor Dowling ..." The patient's son, she informed them, had arrived already and was in a special standby room. They should make themselves comfortable over yonder (she indicated a couch-and-chair area across the fluorescent-lighted room, which they were relieved to see was unoccupied); she would keep them posted, she promised.

And so they sat, side by side on one of the dark gray plastic-cushioned couches, Sue's left hand clasped in Dick's right; they were too shocked to do more than murmur how sad it all was. On end tables beside them were back issues of *Time*, *Fortune*, *People*, *Chesapeake Living*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Field & Stream*. The sight of their covers, attention-grabbing reminders of the busy world, made Dick Felton wince: Never had he felt more keenly that All That was behind them. If Dr. Dowling's wife, per instructions, came to retrieve her husband half an hour or so after he left the toga party, Sue presently speculated, then there must be a special entrance as well as a special standby room, as more time than that had passed since their own arrival at Avon Health Center without their seeing any sign of her or him. Eventually, however, the receptionist's telephone warbled; she attended the message, made some reply, and then called "Mister and Miz Felton?" There being no one else to hear, without waiting for them to come to her station she announced Dr. Dowling's opinion that there was no reason for them to stay longer: Mr. Bailey, his condition stabilized, had been moved to intensive care, in serious but no longer critical condition. He had lost a great deal of blood, injured some internal organs, and would need further surgery down the line, but was expected to survive. His son was with him.

"Poor bastard," Dick said—meaning either or both of the pair, he supposed: the father doomed to an even more radically reduced existence than the one he had tried unsuccessfully to exit; the dutifully attentive but already busy son now saddled with the extra burdens of arranging the care of an invalid parent and the management of that parent's house until he could unload it and install the old fellow in Bayview Manor, across and downriver from Heron Bay Estates, or some other assisted-living facility.

"Loving children *do* those things," Sue reminded him. "Sure, it's a major headache, but close families accept it."

Lucky them, they both were thinking as they drove back to HBE, through the main entrance gate (opened by the night-shift gatekeeper at sight of the Resident sticker on their Toyota's lower left windshield-corner), and on to their Rockfish Reach neighborhood, Sue having cell-phoned her promised report to the Hardisons as they left the AHC parking lot. How would either of themselves manage, alone, in some

similar situation, with their far-flung and not all that filially bonded son and daughter?

"We wouldn't," in Dick's opinion, and his wife couldn't disagree.

All the partygoers' cars were gone from Loblolly Court, they observed as they passed it, but lights were still on in #12, where cleanup no doubt continued. By the time they reached their own house's pleasantly night-lighted drive and entranceway, the car's dashboard clock read the same as their Shoreside Drive house number: 1020. Noting the coincidence, "Now *that* means something," Susan said—a Felton family joke, echoing Dick's late mother (who'd fortunately had a devoted or anyhow dutiful unmarried middle-aged daughter to attend her senile last years in western Maryland). But her effort at humor was made through suddenly welling tears: tears for herself, she explained when her husband remarked them as he turned into their driveway; tears for them both, as much as for poor Sam Bailey.

Dick pressed the garage door opener button over the rearview mirror, turned their convertible expertly into the slot beside their station wagon, shifted into Park, clicked off the headlights, and pressed the remote button again to roll the door back down. Instead of then shutting off the engine and unlatching his seat belt, however, after a moment he pushed the buttons to lower all of the car's windows, closed his eyes, and leaned his head back wearily against the driver's headrest.

"What are you doing?" There was some alarm in Susan's voice, but she too left her seat belt fastened, and made no move to open her door. "Why'd you do that?"

Without turning his head or opening his eyes, her husband took her hand in his as he'd done back in the hospital waiting room, squeezing it now even more tightly. "Shit, hon, why not? We've had a good life together, but it's done with except for the crappy last lap, and neither of us wants that."

"I sure don't," his wife acknowledged, and with a sigh back-rested her head, too. Already they could smell exhaust fumes. "I love you, Dick."

"I love *you*. And okay, so we're dumping on the kids, leaving them to take the hit and clean up the mess. So what?"

"They'll never forgive us. But you're right. So what?"

"We'll each be presumed to have survived the other, as the saying goes, and neither of us'll be around to know it."

The car engine quietly idled on.

"Shouldn't we at least leave them a note, send them an e-mail, something?"

"So go do that if you want to. Me, I'm staying put."

He heard her exhale. "Me too, I guess." Then inhale, deeply.

If Doc Sam Bailey were this story's teller, he'd probably end it right here with a bit of toga-party Latin: *Consummatum est; requiescat in pacem*—something in that vein. But he's not.

The overhead garage light timed out.

Teardown

IN LARGE gated communities like our Heron Bay Estates development, obsolescence sets in early. The developers knew their business: a great flat stretch of former pine woods and agribusiness feed-corn fields along the handsome Matahannock River, ten minutes from the attractive little colonial-era town of Stratford and two hours from Baltimore/Washington in one direction, Wilmington/Philadelphia in another, and Atlantic beach resorts in a third, converted in the go-go American 1980s into appealingly laid-out subdevelopments of condos, villas, coach homes, and detached-house neighborhoods, the whole well landscaped and amenitied. The first such large-scale project on the Eastern Shore end of Maryland's Chesapeake Bay Bridge, it proved so successful that twenty years later it was not only all but "built out" (except for a still controversial proposal for midrise condominiums in what was supposed to remain wood-and-wet-land preserve), but in its "older" subcommunities, like Spartina Pointe, already showing its age. In Stratford's historic district, an "old house" may date from the early eighteenth century; in Heron Bay Estates it dates from Ronald Reagan's second presidential term. More and more, as the American wealthy have grown ever wealthier and the original builder-owners of upscale Spartina Pointe (mostly retirees from one of those above-mentioned cities, for many of whom Heron Bay Estates was a weekend-and-summer retreat, a second or even third residence) aged and died or shifted to some assisted-living facility, the new owners of their twenty-year-old "colonial" mini-mansions commence their tenure with radical renovation: new kitchen and baths, a swimming pool and larger patio/deck area, faux-cobblestone driveway and complete relandscaping—all subject, of course, to approval by the HBE Design Review Board.

Which august three-member body, a branch of our Heron Bay Estates Community Association, had reluctantly approved, back in the 1980s, the original design for 211 Spartina Court, a rambling brick-and-clapboard rancher on a prime two-acre lot at the very point of Spartina Point(e), with narrow but navigable Spartina Creek on three sides. It was a two-to-one decision: None of the three board members was happy to let a ranch house, however roomy, set the architectural tone for what was intended as HBE's highest-end neighborhood; two- and three-story plantation-style manses were what they had in mind. But while one of the board folk was steadfastly opposed, another judged it more important to get a first house built (its owners were prepared to begin construction immediately upon their plan's

approval) in order to help sell the remaining lots and encourage the building of residences more appropriate to the developer's intentions. The third member was sympathetic to both opinions; she ultimately voted approval on the grounds that preliminary designs for two neighboring houses were exactly what was wanted for Spartina Pointe—neo-Georgian manors of whitewashed brick, with two-story front columns and the rest—and together should adequately establish the neighborhood's style. The ranch house was allowed, minus the rustic split-rail fence intended to mark the lot's perimeter, and with the provision that a few Leyland cypresses be planted instead, to partially screen the residence from street-side view.

The strategy succeeded. Within a few years the several "drives" and "courts" of Spartina Pointe were lined with more or less imposing, more or less Georgian-style homes: no Cape Cods, Dutch colonials, or half-timbered Tudors (all popular styles in easier-going Rockfish Reach), certainly nothing contemporary, and no more ranchers. The out-of-synch design of 211 Spartina Court raised a few eyebrows, but the house's owners, Ed and Myra Gunston, were hospitable, community-spirited ex-Philadelphians whom none could dislike: organizers of neighborhood parties and progressive dinners, spirited fund-raisers for the Avon County United Way and other worthy causes. A sad day for Spartina Pointe when Myra was crippled by a stroke; another, some months later, when a For Sale sign appeared in front of those Leyland cypresses.

All the above established, we may begin this teardown story, which is not about the good-neighbor Gunstons, and for which the next chapter in the history of their Spartina Point(e) house, heavily foreshadowed by the tale's title, is merely the occasion. We shift now across Heron Bay Estates to 414 Doubler Drive, in Blue Crab Bight, the second-floor coach home of early-fortyish Joseph and Judith Barnes—first explaining to non-tidewater types that "doubler" is the local watermen's term for the mating stage of *Callinectes sapidus*, the Chesapeake Bay blue crab. The male of that species mounts and clasps fast the female who he senses is about to molt, so that when eventually she sheds her carapace and becomes for some hours a helpless "softcrab," he can both shield her from predators and have his way with her himself, to the end of continuing the species: a two-for-one catch for lucky crabbers, and an apt street name for a community of over-and-under duplexes, whose owners (and some of the rest of us) do not tire of explaining to out-of-staters.

Some months have passed since the space break above: It is now the late afternoon of a chilly-wet April Friday in an early year of the

twenty-first century. Ruddy-plump Judy Barnes has just arrived home from her English-teaching job at Fenton, a small private coed junior-senior high school near Stratford, where she's also an assistant girls' soccer coach. This afternoon's intramural game having been rained out, she's home earlier than usual and is starting dinner for the family: her husband, a portfolio manager in the Stratford office of Lucas & Jones, LLC; their elder daughter, Ashleigh, a Stratford College sophomore who lives in the campus dorms but often comes home on weekends; and Ashleigh's two-years-younger sister, Tiffany, a (tuition-waived) sixth-form student at Fenton, who's helping Mom with dinner prep.

Osso buco, it's going to be. While Judy shakes the veal shanks in a bag of salt-and-peppered flour and Tiffany dices carrots, celery, onions, and garlic cloves for preliminary sautéing, Joe Barnes is closing his office for the weekend with the help of Jeannine Weston, his secretary, and trying in vain to stop imagining that lean, sexy-sharp young woman at least half naked in various positions to receive in sundry of her orifices his already wet-tipped penis. *Quit that already!* he reprimands himself, to no avail. *Bear in mind that not only do you honor your marriage and love your family, you also say amen to the Gospel According to Mark, which stipulates that Thou Shalt Not Hump the Help.* "Mark" being Mark Matthews, his boss and mentor, first in Baltimore and then, since Lucas & Jones opened their Eastern Shore office five years ago, in Stratford. That's when the Barneses bought 414 Doubler Drive: a bit snug for a family of four with two teenagers, but a sound investment, bound to appreciate rapidly in value as the population of Avon and its neighboring counties steadily grows. The girls had shared a bedroom since their babyhood and enjoyed doing so right through their adolescence; the elderly couple in 412, the coach home's first-floor unit, were both retired and retiring, so quiet that one could almost forget that their place was occupied. In the four years until their recent, reluctant move to Bayview Manor, they never once complained about Ashleigh's and Tiffany's sometimes noisy get-togethers with school friends.

Perhaps Reader is wincing at the heavy New Testament sound of "Mark Matthews Lucas and Jones"? "Thou shalt not wince," Mark himself enjoys commanding new or prospective clients in their first interview. "Why do you think Jim Lucas and Harvey Jones [the firm's cofounders] hired me in the first place, if not to spread the Good Word about asset management?" Which the fellow did in sooth, churning their portfolios to the firm's benefit as well as theirs and coaching his protégé to do likewise. That earlier gospel-tenet of his, however, he formulated after breaking it himself: In his mid-fifties, coincident with the move from Baltimore to Stratford, he ended his twenty-five-year

first marriage to wed the striking young woman who'd been his administrative assistant for three years and his mistress for two. "Don't hump the help," he then enjoyed advising their dinner guests, Joe and Judy included, in his new bride's presence. "You should see my alimony bills!" "Plus he had to find himself a new secretary," trim young Mrs. Matthews liked to add, "once his office squeeze became his trophy wife"—and his unofficial deputy account manager, handling routine portfolio transactions from her own office in their Stratford house, "where unfortunately I can't keep an eye on him."

But "Eew, Mom!" Tiffany Barnes is exclaiming in the kitchen of 414 Doubler Drive, where she's ladling excess fat off the osso buco broth. "Even without this glop, the stuff's so *greasy*!"

"Delicious, though," her mother insists. "And we only have it a couple times a year."

"We have it *only* a couple times a year," her just-arrived other daughter corrects her. An English major herself, Ashleigh likes to catch her family's slips in grammar and usage, especially her English-teacher mother's. Patient Judy rolls her eyes. "Dad says I should open a cabernet to breathe before dinner," the girl then adds. "He'll be up in a minute. He's doing stuff in the garage."

"Just take a taste of this marrow," Judy invites both girls, indicating a particularly large cross-section of shank bone in the casserole, it's core of brown marrow fully an inch in diameter, "and tell me it's not the most delicious thing you ever ate."

"Ee-e-ew!" her daughters chorus in unison. Then Tiffany (who's taking an elective course at Fenton called The Bible As Literature that her secular mother frowns at as a left-handed way of sneaking religion into the curriculum, although she quite respects the colleague who's teaching it) adds, "Think not of the marrow?" Judy chuckles proudly; Ashleigh groans at the pun, musses her sister's hair, and goes to the wine rack to look for cabernet sauvignon, singing a retaliatory pun of her own that she'd seen on a bumper sticker earlier in the week: "*Life is a ca-ber-net, old chum ...*"

Sipping same half an hour later with a store-bought duck pâté in the living room, where a fake log crackles convincingly in the glass-shuttered fireplace, "So guess who just bought that house at the far end of Spartina Court?" Joe Barnes asks his wife. "Mark and Mindy Matthews!"

"Mindy," Ashleigh scorns, not for the first time: "What a lame name!" Though only nineteen, she's allowed these days to take half a glass of wine with her parents at cocktail time and another half at dinner, since they know very well that she drinks with her college friends and believe that she's less likely to binge out like too many of

them on beer and hard liquor if, as in most European households, the moderate consumption of wine with dinner is a family custom. Tiffany, having helped with the osso buco, has withdrawn to the sisters' bedroom and her laptop computer until the meal is served.

"That ranch house?" Judy asks. "Why would the Matthewses swap their nice place in Stratford for a run-of-the-mill ranch house?"

Her husband swirls his wine, the better to aerate it. "Because, one, Mark's buying himself a cabin cruiser and wants a waterfront place to go with it. And, two, by the time they move in it'll be no run-of-the-mill ranch house, believe me. Far from it!"

Judy sighs. "Another Heron Bay remodeling job. And we can't even get around to replacing that old Formica in our kitchen! But a renovated rancher's still a rancher."

Uninterested Ashleigh, pencil in hand, is back to her new passion, the sudoku puzzle from that day's *Baltimore Sun*. She has the same shoulder-length straight dark hair and trim tight body that her mother had when Joe and Judy first met as University of Maryland undergraduates two dozen years ago, and that Jeannine Weston (of whose tantalizing figure Joe is disturbingly reminded lately whenever, as now, he remarks this about his eldest daughter) has not yet outgrown. He and Judy both, on the other hand, have put on the pounds—and his hair is thinning toward baldness, and hers showing it's first traces of gray, before they even reach fifty ...

"Never mind remodeling and renovation," he says. "That's not Mark's style." He raises his glass as if in toast: "Heron Bay Estates is about to see it's very first teardown!"

... plus her generous, once so fine, firm breasts are these days anything but, and "love handles" would be the kindest term for those side rolls of his that, like his belly, have begun to lap over his belted trouser top. Men, of course, enjoy the famously unfair advantage that professional success may confer upon their dealings with the opposite sex: Unsaintly Mark, e.g., is hardly the tall/dark/handsome type, but his being double-chinned, pudgy, and doorknob bald didn't stand in the way of his scoring with pert blond Mindy—and what in God's name is Joe Barnes up to, thinking such thoughts at Happy Hour in the bosom of his family?

Thus self-rebuked, he takes it upon himself to clean up the hors d'oeuvres and call Tiffany to set the table while Judy assembles a salad and Ashleigh pops four dinner rolls into the toaster oven. As is their weekend custom when all hands are present, they then clink glasses (three wines, one diet Coke) and say their mock table-grace—"Bless this grub and us that eats it"—before settling into the osso buco. *I love you all, goddamn it!* lump-throated Joe reminds himself.

"So what do the Matthewses intend to put up in place of their teardown?" Judy asks. "One of those big colonial-style jobs, I guess?"

"Oh, no." Her husband grins, shakes his head. "Wait'll you see. You know that fancy new spread on Loblolly Court, over in Rockfish Reach?" Referring to an imposing Mediterranean-style stucco-and-tiled-roof house built recently in that adjacent neighborhood despite the tsk-tsks of numerous homeowners there.

"Ee-e-ew," comments Tiffany.

"Well, this morning Mark showed me their architect's drawings for what he and Mindy have in mind—Mindy especially, but Mark's all for it—and it makes that Loblolly Court place look as humble as ours."

"Ee-e-ew!" Ashleigh agrees with her sister: a putdown not of their coach home, which she's always happy to return to from her dorm even though their bedroom has become mainly Tiffany's space these days, but the pretentiousness, extravagance, and inconsiderate arrogance, in her liberal opinion, of even the Loblolly Court McMansion, which at least was built on an unoccupied lot.

A month or so later, on a fair-weather A.M. bicycle ride through the pleasantly winding bike and jogging paths of Heron Bay Estates, Judy and the girls and a couple of Tiffany's Fenton classmates pedal up Spartina Court to see what's what (Joe's in Baltimore with his boss and secretary at some sort of quarterly meeting in the Lucas & Jones home office). Sure enough, the Gunstons' rambling rancher and its screen of trees have been cleared away completely and replaced by a building-permit board and a vast shallow excavation, the foundation footprint of the Matthewses' palatial residence-in-the-works.

"A perfectly okay house," indignant Ashleigh informs her sister's friends, "no older than ours and twice as big, and *wham!* They just knock it down, haul it to the dump, and put up Buckingham Palace instead!"

"More like the Alhambra," in her younger sister's opinion (Tiff's art history course at Fenton includes some architecture as well).

"Or Michael Jackson's Neverland?" offers one of her companions.

"Dad showed us the latest computer projections of it last week?" Ash explains with the rising inflection so popular among her generation. "Ee-e-ew! And he thinks it's just fine!"

"Different people go for different things," her mother reminds them all. "*De gustibus non est disputandum?*"

"See what I mean?" Tiffany asks her friends, and they seem to, though what it is they see, Judy prefers not to wonder.

"Anyhow," Ashleigh adds, "whatever's right by our dad's boss is fine with our dad."

"Ashleigh! Really!"

Tiffany's exaggerated frown suggests that on this one she sides with her mother, at least in the presence of nonfamily. To Judy's relief, Ashleigh drops the subject, and they finish their bike ride.

Over their early Sunday dinner, however—which Joe, as promised, has returned from Baltimore in time for, before Ashleigh goes back to her dorm—the girl takes up her cudgel again. It's one thing, she declares, to build a big pretentious new house like that eyesore in Rockfish Reach, if that's what a person wants? But to tear down a perfectly okay quote-unquote *older* one to do it is, in her opinion, downright obscene—like those people who order a full-course restaurant meal and then just nibble at each course, leaving the rest to be tossed out. Gross!

"Weak analogy," her teacher mother can't help pointing out. "Let's think up a better one."

"Like those people who buy a new car every two years?" Tiffany offers. "When their quote *old* one's in perfectly good condition with maybe ten thousand miles on it?"

"No good," in her sister's opinion, "because at least the old car gets traded in and resold and used. This is more like if every time they buy a new one they *junk* their perfectly okay old one."

"Good point," Judy approves.

"Or like Saint Mark Matthews," bold Ashleigh presses on, "dumping the mother of his kids for a trophy blond airhead half his age."

Alarmed, Tiffany glances from sister to mother to dad. But Joe, who until now has seemed to Judy still to have city business on his mind, here joins the conversation like the partner she's loved for two dozen years. "Beg to disagree, guys? Not with your analogies, but with your judgment, okay? Because what the heck, Ash: The ranch-house people weren't evicted or dumped; they put their place up for sale and got close to their asking price for it. Seems to me the whole business calls for nothing more than a raised eyebrow—more for the new house's design, if you don't happen to like it, than for the replacement idea itself."

"I think I second that," his wife decides.

"And Mindy Matthews, by the way, is no *airhead*," Joe informs his daughters. "She's sharp as a tack."

"Hot in bed, too, I bet," Tiffany makes bold to add. Her father frowns disapproval. Judy declares, "That's none of our business, girls."

"But what still gets me, Dad," Ashleigh persists, less belligerently,

"is the *extravagance* of it! We learned in poly sci this week that if Earth's whole human population could be shrunk to a village of exactly one hundred people—with all the same ratios as now?—only thirty of us would be white people, only twenty would live in better than substandard housing, only eight would have some savings in the bank as well as clothes on our back and food in the pantry, and only *one* of the hundred would have all that plus a college education! And you're telling us that this tear-down thing isn't disgraceful?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you," her father amiably agrees. "We live in a prosperous free-enterprise country, thank God. Mark Matthews—whom I happen to very much admire—earned his money by brains and hard work, and he and Mindy are entitled to spend it as they damn well please. And their architect, builder, and landscaper are all local outfits, so they'll be putting a couple million bucks into Avon County's economy right there, along with their whopping property taxes down the line." He turns up his palms. "Everybody benefits; nobody gets hurt. So what's your problem, Lefty?"

This last is a family tease of a couple years' standing. Ashleigh Barnes was in fact born left-handed, as was Judy's mother, but the nickname dates from her ever more emphatic liberalism since her fifth- and sixth-form years at Fenton. It's a tendency that her younger sister has lately been manifesting as well, although apart from their mother and a few of Judy's colleagues, the school, it's faculty, and it's students' families are predominantly center-right Republicans.

Her problem, Ashleigh guesses with a sigh, is that she just doesn't like fat cats.

"Mindy Matthews *fat*?" Tiffany pretends to protest. "She's downright anorexic! Speaking of which," she adds to her father, "at least one person sure got hurt when Saint Mark changed horses: Sharon Matthews." Mindy's predecessor.

Judy looks to her husband with a smile and raised eyebrows, as if to ask, How d'you answer *that* one? But Joe merely shrugs and says, "With the alimony payments she's getting for the rest of her life, that woman can cry all the way to the bank. So let's enjoy our dinner now, okay?"

His wife sees their daughters give each other their we-give-up look. She does likewise, for the present, and the family returns to enjoying, or at least making the best of, one another's company.

Later that evening, Ashleigh drives back to campus in her hand-me-down Honda Civic, Tiffany busies herself in her room with homework and computer, Judy takes a preliminary whack at the *Sunday New*

York Times crossword puzzle before prepping her Monday lesson plans, Joe scans that newspaper's business section while pondering what Mark Matthews told him that morning en route back from Baltimore in Mark's new Lexus (Mark and his secretary in the front seat, Joe and Jeannine Weston in the rear) and that he hasn't gotten around yet to sharing with Judy—and the new downstairs neighbors' little Yorkshire terrier starts the infernal yip-yipping again that's been driving them batty ever since the Creightons moved into 412 a month ago. They're a pleasant enough younger couple, he an assistant manager at the Stratford GM dealership, she a part-time dietitian at Avon Health Center and busy mother of their four-year-old son. But the kid is noisy and the dog noisier—a far cry from the unit's previous owners!—and although the Creightons respond good-naturedly to the Barneses' tactful complaints, promising to see what if anything they can do about the problem ("You know how it is with kids and pets!"), it gets no better.

He slaps the newspaper down in his lap. "We've got to get out of this fucking place, hon."

"I'm ready." For rich as it is with five years' worth of family memories—the girls' adolescence, their parents' new jobs—the coach home has never really been big enough. No home-office space; no TV/family room separate from the living room; a dining area scarcely large enough to seat six. No guest room even with Ashleigh in the dorm; no real backyard of their own for gardening and barbecuing and such. But the place has, as they'd predicted, substantially appreciated in value, and although any alternative housing will have done likewise, by Joe's reckoning they're "positioned," as he puts it, to move on and up. What Judy would go for is one of the better Oyster Cove villas, a side-by-side duplex instead of over-and-under: three bedrooms, of which one could be her study/workroom and another a combination guest room/den once Tiffany's of to college; a separate family room with adjacent workshop and utility room; and their own small backyard for cookouts, deck lounging, and as much or little gardening as they care to bother with. But what Joe has in mind lately is more ambitious: to buy and renovate one of those older detached houses in Rockfish Reach. A dining room big enough for entertaining friends and colleagues in style, as well as Ash and Tiff and *their* friends; a *real* yard and patio; maybe a pool and some kind of outboard runabout to keep at their own private dock. And they should finally cough up the money to join the Heron Bay Club on a golf membership and take up the game, without which one is definitely *out* of the social scene (so Mark told him, among other things, in the car that morning).

Judy's flabbergasted. "Are you *kidding*? A twelve-thousand-buck

initiation fee plus, what, two-hundred-a-month dues? Plus a house to renovate and two college tuitions coming up, dot dot dot question mark?" It's a thing she does now and then.

"Leave that to me, hon," her husband suggests, in a tone she's been hearing him use lately. "I've learned a thing or two from Master Mark about estate building." *Among other things*, he silently adds and she silently worries—not without cause, although "Tennis, maybe, but count me out on the golf" is all she says aloud. "Not this schoolmarm's style."

Amiably, not to alarm her, "Folks can change their style, you know," he says—and then shares with her part of what's been distracting him all day, since Mark announced it on the drive home. Jim Lucas, one of the firm's founding partners, intends to retire as of the fiscal year's end. Mark Matthews will be replacing him as senior partner and codirector of the company's home office (he and Mindy are buying a condo on the city's Inner Harbor to supplement their Spartina Pointe weekend-and-vacation spread). "And Saint Mark's successor as chief of our Stratford office will be ... guess who? Whoops, sorry there, Teach: Guess *whom*."

"Oh, *sweetie!*" She flings aside her crossword and lays on the congratulatory cries and kisses; calls for Tiffany to come hear Daddy's big news; asks him why in the world he didn't announce it while Ashleigh was there to hear it too; but laughingly agrees with him that the girl will scornfully assign them to the *crème de la crème* of her hypothetical hundred-person village—and refrains from pointing out to him that the nominative-case "guess who" is in fact correct, the pronoun being the transposed subject of the verb "will be" rather than the object of "guess." No champagne in the house to toast his promotion with; they'll get some and raise a glass to him when Ashleigh's next with them. And in their *new* house, maybe he can have the wine cellar he's always yearned for! Meanwhile ...

"Congratulations, Dad!" cheers Tiffany, piling onto his lap to kiss him. And when Mom and Dad retire not long afterward to their bedroom for the night, Judy gives her crotch a good washcloth-wipe after peeing, to freshen it in case he goes down there in the course of celebratory sex. Since the commencement of her early menopause, she's been bothered by occasional yeast infections, with accompanying vaginal discharge and sometimes downright painful intercourse—not that they go at it as often or as athletically as in years past.

But this night they do, *sans soixante-neuf* and such but vigorously *a tergo* and, to her mild surprise, in the dark. Normally they leave Joe's nightstand light dimmed during lovemaking, to facilitate his finding, opening, and applying their personal lubricant and to enjoy the sight

of each other's so familiar naked bodies. Tonight, however, it's only after he clicks off the light and snuggles up to say goodnight (also to her surprise) that Joe seems to change his mind. He places his right hand on his partial erection and raises himself on one elbow to lift her short nightie, kiss her navel and nipples, and begin fingering her vulva—all the while scolding himself for imagining a certain younger, leaner body responding to his caresses. In the car that afternoon, when Mark broke the big news of his own and Joe's promotions, Jeannine Weston had squealed with excitement, flung her arms around her boss (those fine breasts of hers pressing into his right upper arm), and planted a loud wet kiss on his cheek. Alice Benning, Mark's secretary since Mindy's promotion to wifehood, had then declared to all hands that she'd asked Jeannine earlier whether she'd be interested in shifting to Baltimore to become the hot-stuff new front-desk receptionist for Lucas & Jones, LLC, and that the girl had replied, "As long as Joe Barnes wants me, I'm his." "Tattletale!" Jeannine had mock-scolded the older woman, and squeezed her chief's right hand in both of hers and leaned her head fondly on his shoulder. Mark, winking broadly at the couple in his rearview mirror, had teased, "Don't forget Rule Number One, Joe," and when Jeannine asked what *that* might be, Alice turned in her seat to whisper loudly, "It's *Hands off the help*—a good rule to live by, says I." So "Shoo, girl!" Joe had duly then bade his young assistant with a broad wink of his own—and to his startlement, in the spirit of their sport, she had slid laughing over to her side of the seat, crossed one arm over those breasts, and with her other hand cupped her crotch as if protectively. It is those body parts that Joe Barnes helplessly finds himself picturing now, and that tight little butt of hers, bare and upraised for him to clutch in both hands while he thrusts and thrusts and thrusts and *ahhh!* ... collapses atop his accommodating spouse in contrite exhilaration.

Now: This teardown story could proceed from here in any of several pretty obvious directions, e.g.: (1) Joe Barnes "comes to his senses," his love for Judy and the family reaffirmed by that short-lived guilty temptation. While his office relationship with Jean-nine Weston retains an element of jocular flirtation, no adultery follows. A year later the young woman is reoffered that receptionist post in the Baltimore office, and this time she takes it. Her replacement in Stratford is a married woman slightly older than Joe: amiable and competent, but not the stuff of lecherous fantasies. Alternatively, (2) somewhat to his own appall, Joe does indeed succumb to temptation and "humps the help," either in what used to be Mark Matthews's office but is now his or in some motel far enough from town for

anonymity. The imaginable consequences range from (a) Next to None (adultery goes undiscovered; both parties, ashamed, decide not to repeat it; Jeannine meets and soon after marries a young professor at Stratford College who eventually moves to a better-paying academic post in Indiana), to (b) Considerable (Joe confesses to Judy and asks for divorce with generous settlement. She brokenheartedly agrees to what she condemns as a "marital teardown." Joe and Jeannine then wed and do a modified Mark-and-Mindy, renovating a large house in Rockfish Reach. The girls, both in college by that time, are shocked, embarrassed, and angry, but in time come more or less to terms with the family's disruption. Judy remarries—an estate lawyer from her southern Maryland hometown—and all parties get on with their lives' next chapter, neither unscarred nor, on balance, unhappy), to (c) Disastrous (Judy discovers the affair, goes ballistic, sues for divorce, and bars Joe from the house. Their daughters turn against him for life. The small-town scandal obliges Jeannine to quit her job and Joe to shift, under a cloud, to Lucas & Jones's far-western-Maryland office. "What'd I tell you?" Mark scolds triumphantly. Judy stays on at her Fenton post and in the Blue Crab Bight coach house, where the downstairs dog yips maddeningly on to the tale's last page and beyond).

My personal inclination (George Newett here, Reader, who's been dreaming up this whole story: Tale Teller Emeritus [but no tale bearer] in Stratford College's Department of English and Creative Writing and, like "Joe and Judy Barnes," resident with my Mrs. in Blue Crab Bight) is to go with (3) None of the Above. This being, after all, a teardown story, I'm deciding to tear the sumbitch down right about here, the way people like "Mark and Mindy Matthews" might decide to tear down not only the Gunstons' "old" ranch house on Spartina Court but also the barely started *hacienda grande* that they're in the costly process of replacing it with. Mindy, let's say, has been belatedly persuaded by her longtime friend and fellow Stratford alumna Faye Robertson (now on the Fenton Day School faculty, Judy Barnes's colleague and Tiffany's art history teacher) that a mission-style *palacio* in Spartina Pointe will be as in-your-face and out of place as that neo-Neapolitan *palazzo* of Tom and Patricia Hardison's in Rock-fish Reach, and that for the sake of Heron Bay Estates' "aesthetic ecology," the Matthewses really ought to have considered a Williamsburg-style manse instead. "Never too late to reconsider," I imagine bold Mindy declaring to her astonished friend with a Just You Watch sort of laugh and then announcing her mind-change to "Saint Mark," who wonders whether *he'd* better reconsider what he's gotten himself into with this woman. Maybe time for a midstream change of horses on *that* front too? But he then decides it'd be a better demonstration of upscale

panache just to shrug, chuckle, and say, "Whatever milady desireth ..."

You see how it is with us storytellers—with some of us, anyhow, perhaps especially the Old Fart variety, whereof Yours Truly is a member of some standing. Our problem, see, is that we invent people like the Barneses, do our best to make them reasonably believable and even simpatico, follow the rules of Story by putting them in a high-stakes situation—and then get to feeling more responsibility to *them* than to you, the reader. "Never too late to reconsider," we end up saying to ourselves like Mindy Matthews, and instead of ending their teardown tale for better or worse (sorry about that, guys), we pull it's narrative plug before somebody gets hurt.

Here's how:

The Bard Award

OF THE MANY TIDAL rivers on Maryland's Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay, most bear Indian names, as does the great Bay itself; names antedating the fateful arrival of white colonists four centuries ago, but filtered through those English ears into their present form and spelling: Pocomoke, Wicomico, Nanticoke, Choptank—and the handsome Matahannock, near whose ever-less-wooded shores I write these lines. A mile wide where it ebbs and flows past our Heron Bay Estates, the Matahannock (like these opening sentences of this would-be story) then winds on and on: another dozen-plus miles upstream, ever narrower and shallower, northeastward through the agribusiness corn and soybean fields and industrial-scale chicken farms of our table-flat Delmarva Peninsula to its petering out (or in) at its marshy headwaters somewhere near the Delaware state line, and about the same distance downstream from here, ever wider and somewhat deeper, southwestward past marinas, goose-hunting blinds, crab- and oyster-boat wharves, former steamboat landings, eighteenth-century estates, twenty-first-century mega-mansions, and more and more waterfront developments, until it joins our planet's largest estuarine system, which itself flows from and ebbs into the Atlantic and thence all the other oceans. Although no Heron Bay Estater has yet done so or likely ever will (we being mostly Golden Agers), one could theoretically set out from HBE's Blue Crab Marina Club, sail down the Matahannock, under the Bay Bridge and on south into Virginia waters, then hang a left at Cape Charles and cruise on to the Azores, Cape Town, Tahiti—right round the world!

The region's counties, on the other hand, like the state they subdivide, have Anglo names—not surprisingly, since they didn't exist as geographical entities until the natives' dispossessors claimed, mapped, and laid them out: Dorchester, Talbot, Avon, Kent—most of them boundaried by the above-mentioned rivers. Ditto those counties' seats and other towns, their American characters quite out of synch with their historic English names. Cambridge and Oxford, for example, on opposite shores of the broad Choptank, are pleasant small towns both, but absent anything remotely like their Brit counterparts' venerable universities.

Likewise "our" Avon County's Stratford (the gated community of Heron Bay Estates is five miles downriver, but Avon's county seat is our P.O.). A colonial-era customs port on the slightly wider river-stretch where Stratford Creek joins the Matahannock, it's now a comfortable town of six or seven thousand that nowise resembles its

famed English antecedent: not a thatched roof or half-timbered gable-end to be found in our Stratford's red-brick-Georgian historic district. Unlike those Choptank towns afore-noted, however, it does in fact boast a modest institution of higher learning. Stratford College is no Oxford or Cambridge University, but it's a good small liberal-arts college, old by American standards like the town itself. We currently enroll some fifteen hundred students, mainly from our tri-state peninsula, with a double handful from across the Bay and nearby Pennsylvania and half a handful from remoter venues. As might be expected of a Stratford in, if not quite on, an Avon, the college gives particular emphasis and budgetary support to its Department of English and Creative Writing. *Who'll be our Shakespeare?*, our student-recruitment ads ask prospective applicants: *Maybe you!*—adding that many a potential bard not *born* in Stratford has been *reborn* in the College's Shakespeare House, headquarters of the writing program, "under the benignly masterful tutelage of experienced author-professors on the faculty and distinguished visitors to the campus." What's more (those ads bait their hook by declaring further), every budding playwright, poet, and prose writer in the program has a shot at winning the College's Shakespeare Prize, awarded annually to the graduating senior with "the most impressive body of literary work composed in his or her courses."

And this is where Yours Truly comes in, eventually. Stratford's "Bard Award," as everybody on campus calls it, is a hefty prize indeed, endowed some decades ago by a wealthy alumnus who had aspired unsuccessfully to playwriting but later flourished as the CEO of Tidewater Communities, Inc., his family's real-estate development firm. His munificent Shakespeare Fund pays the honoraria and travel expenses of an impressive series of visiting lecturers, maintains Shakespeare House and its associated quarterly lit mag, *The Stratford Review*, and annually showers one lucky apprentice writer with a cash award currently twice the size of—get this—the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and PEN's Faulkner Prize combined: the equivalent of at least two years' tuition at the College or the annual salary of one of its midrange professors! Little wonder that competition is intense among the ten to fifteen seniors who submit portfolios (StratColl .edu is a small operation, remember), and the pressure considerable on the half-dozen of us faculty folk who review and, to the best of our ability, judge them.

That "us" and "our" ... After thirty-some years of teaching at Stratford, I'm newly retired from academe these days, but I still enjoy hanging out at Shakespeare House with new students and old colleagues (my wife among them, who has a couple of years yet to go before joining me in geezerdom) and serving on the Prize Committee.

Mandy and I are a pair of those "experienced author-professors" mentioned in the school's ads, who out of teacherly habit here remind you that Experienced doesn't necessarily mean Good, much less Successful. Not likely you'll have heard of the "fictionist" George Newett or his versifying spouse Amanda Todd, even if you're one of those ever scarcer Americans who still read literature for pleasure (as you must be if you're reading this, if it ever gets published, if it ever gets written). Oh, I scored the occasional short story once upon a time, and Mandy the occasional lyric poem, mainly in serious quarterlies not much more widely read than our *Stratford Review*: little magazines that we ourselves rarely glance at unless something of ours or our colleagues is in them, which was never often and, in my case anyhow, is now nearly never. *The New Yorker*? *Harper's*? *Atlantic Monthly*? Neither of us ever made it into those prestigious (and better-paying) glossies. I did manage to place a novel forty years ago—not with one of the New York trade houses, alas, but with my midwestern alma mater's university press. On the strength of that modest publication plus three or four lit-mag stories, an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and two years of assistant-professoring at one of our state university's branch campuses, I was hired at Stratford, where then-young Mandy was already an instructor with an M.A. from Johns Hopkins and a comparably promising track record in poetry. A fine place to raise kids, she and I were soon happily agreeing in and out of bed—and so the town and its surroundings proved to be. Over our wedded decades, however, our separate and never loquacious muses more or less clammed up here in Oyster and Blue Crab Land, as they doubtless would have in any other venue, and we learned to content ourselves with trying to help others do better than their coaches were doing. The circumstance that as of this writing no Stratford alum has managed that not-so-difficult achievement does not prove our pedagogical labors fruitless, at least in our and most of our colleagues' opinion. Our program's graduates are better writers by baccalaureate time than they were at matriculation: more knowledgeable about language, literary forms and genres, and the achievements of three thousand years' worth of their predecessors. If they then become law clerks, businesspeople, schoolteachers, or whatever else, rather than capital-W Writers—well, so did their profs, and we don't consider *our* careers wasted.

Do we?

We don't, really, most of us more-or-less-Failed Old Farts, at least not most of the time. For one thing, showing all those apprentice scribblers what wasn't working in *their* works (that worked so well in the works of the great ones they were reading) showed us FOFs, on another level, the same thing vis-à-vis our own, if you follow me, and

our consequent self-silencing spared posterity a lot of second- and third-rate writing, no? Though, come to think of it, most of our never-finished-if-ever-even-started stuff wouldn't have found a publisher anyhow, and most of what managed to find one would've mostly gone unread. So what the hell.

That being the case, why in the world am I writing *this*, and where, and to whom? The *where*, at least, I can answer: I'm in my office-cum-guest-room in our empty-nest coach home in Blue Crab Bight, a neighborhood of over-and-under duplexes in the sizable community of Heron Bay Estates, itself one of several extensive developments—residential and commercial, urban/ suburban/exurban—built by the virtual patron of Stratford's Shakespeare Prize Fund, the aforementioned Tidewater Communities, Inc. Indeed, inasmuch as our house purchase made it's tiny contribution to TCI's profitability and thus to the wealth of it's philanthropical CEO, we Newett-Todds feel triply linked to that problematical award: as coaches of it's candidates, as judges of their efforts, and as (minuscule, indirect) contributors to the winner's outsized jackpot.

It's a jackpot that Stratford's apprentice writing community regards, only half humorously, as jinxed: Shakespeare's Revenge, they call it, or, if they know their *Hamlet*, the Bard's Petard ("For 'tis the sport to have the enginer / Hoist with his own petard," the Prince observes grimly in act 3)—as if, having hit the literal jackpot on some gargantuan slot machine, the unlucky winner then gets crushed under an avalanche of coins. Much as our Public Information Office welcomes the publicity attendant on every spring's graduation exercises, when the Shakespeare Prize routinely gets more press than the commencement speaker, it's ever more embarrassing side is that of the nearly two-score winners over the decades since the award's establishment, nearly none so far has managed to become "a writer"—i.e., a more or less established and regularly publishing poet, fictionist, essayist, screenwriter, journalist, or scholar—even to the limited extent that their coaches did. Worse yet, some who aspired simply to additional practice in one of our Republic's numerous master of fine arts programs have had their applications rejected by the more prestigious ones despite their not needing a teaching assistant-ship or other financial aid. And the few of our B.A.s who *have* gained admission to those top-drawer graduate programs happen not to have been among our Shakespeare laureates: a circumstance in itself no more surprising than that a number of the world's finest writers—Joyce, Proust, Nabokov, Borges, Calvino—never won the Nobel Prize, while not a few of it's winners remain scarcely known even to us

lovers of literature. *C'est la vie, n'est-ce pas?* But awkward, all the same, for the Bard awardees and awarders alike.

In vain our efforts to reduce the pot to some more reasonable though still impressive size—four or five thousand dollars, say, or even ten—and divert the surplus to other of our program's amenities: more munificent honoraria to attract eminent visitors, better payment for contributors to *The Stratford Review*, upgrades of Shakespeare House's facilities, larger salaries for the writing faculty ... Our benefactor's team of canny lawyers saw to it that the terms of the endowment are un-fiddle-withable. In vain too what I thought to be Mandy's and my inspired suggestion to a certain noted novelist on whom the College conferred an honorary Litt.D. ten years ago: that once the doctoral hood was hung on her, just before the awarding of the Prize, she announce, "By the authority invested in me by the Muse of Story and the Trustees of Stratford College, I declare that what I've been told is called Shakespeare's Curse is hereby lifted, both henceforward and retroactively. My warm congratulations to whoever may be this year's winner: May your efforts bear rich fruit! And my strong encouragement to all previous winners: May the Muse reward with future success your persistence in the face of past disappointment! Amen."

The audience chuckled and applauded; the media were duly amused; that year's prizewinner (a high-spirited and, we judges thought, quite promising young African-American poet from Baltimore) hip-hopped from the podium over to the seated dignitaries, check in hand, to bestow a loud kiss on his would-be savior—and returned triumphantly after the ceremony to his ghetto 'hood across the Bay, only to be killed later that summer in a "drug-related" drive-by shooting. Nor did his forerunners' and successors' fortunes appreciably improve, although several of my thus-far-luckless novel-writing protégés from commencements past have kept on scribbling vainly with their left hands, so to speak, while pursuing nonliterary careers with their right, their old coach having warned them that unlike violinists, mathematicians, theoretical physicists, and even lyric poets, for example—all of whom tend to blossom early or never—many novelists don't hit their stride until middle age.

Or later.

"So am I there yet?" one such perennially hopeful thirty-five-year-old asked me not long ago in a cover note to the typescript of her opus-still-in-progress, which she'd shipped to Blue Crab Bight for my perusal and comments despite my standing request to our graduates that they pass along all their future *publications*, to warm their old coach's heart and encourage his current coachees, but show me *no more unpublished writings ever*, please. A few pages plucked grudgingly

from the thick pile's opening, middle, and closing chapters attested that their author wasn't, alas, "there yet." To spare her that blunt assessment, I e-mailed my praise for her persistence, reminded her of my No More Manuscripts policy ("We'd be shortchanging our present students if we kept on critiquing our alumnae"), and reminded her further always to enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope with any manuscript that she wanted returned to her. No reply, and so after a fair-enough interval I recycled her eternally gestating opus through my word processor, using its pages' bare white backside for next-draft printouts of my own work-in-regress at the time.

Namely? Well, since you asked: a "story" provisionally titled "The Bard Award," not by Yours Truly, George Newett, but by "Yours Falsely, George Knewit"—a.k.a. a certain Ms. "Cassandra Klause" (quotes hers), beyond question the most troublesome, gifted, and all-round problematical coachee that "Yours Falsely" and his colleagues (my wife included) ever had the much-mixed privilege of coaching, and of being coached by.

Those quotation marks; that saucy sobriquet and *nom de plume*, as openly provocative as the "bare white backside" of a few lines back (all typical Klause touches) ... Who knows how a youngster born to and raised by stolid Methodist parents on an Eastern Shore poultry farm and educated in marshy lower Delmarva's public school system came by age eighteen to be the unpredictably knowledgeable, aesthetically sophisticated, shyly brash and unintimidatable "literary performance artist" (her own designation) who, even as a Stratford freshman, was signing her term papers and exam bluebooks (always in quotes) "Sassy Cassie," "Sandy Claws," or "[in]Subordinate Klause," and contrived on her driver's license and other official documents to have her true name set between quotes? ("It's like that on my birth certificate," "C.K." once declared in class with her puckish smile. "My folks thought it looked more *official* that way.")

"And anyhow," she added this time last year in my old Shakespeare House office, "what's in a name?, as Uncle Will has that poor twat Juliet ask her hot-pants boyfriend. Best way to find out is to try on different ones for size, right? Like pants or penises. Now then, Boss: my final exam. *Ta-da!*" Whereupon she turned her back to me, bent forward, and yanked down her low-cut jeans to display, on her unpantied bare white et cetera, the marker-penned title and opening lines of her latest composition: *A Body of Words, by Nom D. Plume*. I didn't seriously believe, by the way, did I (she nattered calmly on as I hurried to reopen the office door, which she herself had closed before displaying her lettered derrière, and call for my across-the-hall colleague, the FOF poet Amanda Todd, to please come verify that if anyone in the House was Behaving Inappropriately, it was our

student, not her teacher), that that bumpkin of a glover's son from the Stratford boondocks actually wrote those plays himself? About as likely as a down-county chicken farmer's hatchling's winning next year's Bard Award!

Which in fact, however, she added as my wife came to my rescue, she was dead set on doing, this time next year. "C'mon, Doc, *examine* me!"

"Ms. Klause is up to her old tricks," said I with a sigh to Professor Todd, and gestured toward our saucy pupil's "final exam."

"New tricks, guys." She turned her (plumpish) "text" to the pair of us—and to the open door, which my wife quickly reclosed behind herself. "Just call me Randy Sandy, Mandy."

A calmer hand than her spouse in situations involving bare-assed coeds bent over one's office desk, my Mrs. granted briskly, "Very amusing, Cass. And we get your point, I think: all that feminist/deconstructionist blather about Writing the Body? Up with your pants now, please, or you get an Incomplete for the semester."

Undaunted, "Cass my ass, Teach," the girl came back, and maintained her position: "If y'all don't read Cassie's Ass, her semester's incomplete anyhow."

Said I, "Excuse me now, everybody?" and consulted my wife's eyes for her leave to leave: "Professor Todd will review and evaluate your final submission, Ms. Klause—"

To my desktop she retorted, "*Semifinal* submission. You ain't seen nothing yet."

I'd seen more than enough, I declared. I would wait in Professor Todd's office while it's regular tenant examined and evaluated the rest of the text for me. "Your title and pen name pretty well establish the general idea."

To my departing back, as with a headshake I thanked Mandy and got out of there, "No fair, Chief. You read 'em out of cunt-text!"

Some while later, over lunch at a pizzeria just off campus, my wife and I shook heads over this latest, most outrageously provocative bit of *Klauserie*. What she had seen further of *A Body of Words*, she reported (feet, arms, belly, back, and neck had been enough for her), confirmed her opinion of it's being a not-unclever assemblage of quotes from all over the literary corpus, having to do literally or figuratively with the various anatomical items upon which they were inscribed: Virgil's "I sing of arms" on her forearms, the Song of Solomon's "Thy belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies" encircling her navel, etc. "She said she'd intended to 'perform the whole text,' quote-unquote, in class, but then decided to hear your editorial suggestions first."

"Very considerate of her. What a handful that wacko kid is!"

"A *figurative* handful, we presume you mean?" Because though no beauty by fashion-mag standards, the ample-bodied Ms. Klause, we agreed, was a not unclever, not unattractive young woman, not unpopular with her classmates both male and female.

"Listen to us," I said to my spinach-mozzarella stromboli: "Not unclever, not unattractive, not unpopular' ... The girl's extraordinary! One tour de force after another, while everybody else in the room is still doing 'It was a dark and stormy night.' She *deserves* a fucking prize!"

"Better one of those than the Bard Award, we bet."

A certain small voltage had built across the table during this dialogue; it dispersed, if that's what voltages do, when I here declared, "The PITA Prize is what she deserves: Pain In The Ass." Back to being the dedicated, indeed impassioned teacher/colleague/wife I loved, "The girl's amazing," my wife enthused (a verb that she hates, but that her husband sometimes finds convenient). And "While we're talking about writing," she went on, although we hadn't been, exactly, "Ms. PITA Prize suggested to me that you should, and I quote, 'get some *description* done in that lame Bard Award story that he and I are supposedly collaborating on,' close quote. By which she meant you and her. Question mark?"

"What?"

That afore-noted small voltage resurged. "Her very words, George." Raising two fingers to make a quote mark, "Like give the Gentle-Ass Reader some idea of how things feel, smell, sound, and *look*, for pity's sake, beyond Cassie's Bare White Et Cetera and Ms. Mandy's Jealous-Green Eyes, don't you think?' End of quote—and *what the fuck story is she talking about*, please? What's this *collaboration*?"

I was damned if I knew, and energetically swore so, adding that of course Ms. Klause and I had spoken in conference about the much coveted but problematical Shakespeare Prize, I being after all her faculty adviser, and that (partly as a result of that discussion) it had in fact occurred to me that there might be a George Newett short story in there somewhere: about an eccentrically gifted student "writer," say, whose "texts" are collages, rearrangements, pastiches of the words of others. But despite a few notebook notes and a false-start draft page or two, I had yet to work out what that story might be—and most certainly, to my knowledge, hadn't discussed it with "Cassandra Klause." When a potential story of mine is still that nebulous, she might remember, I don't speak of it even to my beloved fellow-writer spouse, much less to my students. And "Could we please change the subject now, hon? Enough voltage already!"

We duly did: spoke of our distant pair of adult children and of our grandchild, already high school age, up in Vermont; of our plans for the weekend; of some of our other, less troublesome Stratford students. But my mind remained at least half on "Cass Klause"'s editorial suggestion, with which I found myself so in accord that I itched to get back to my desk at home and experiment with a bit of sensory detail (never my strongest writerly suit) in that story-not-quite-yet-in-embryo: to "flesh out," for example, such lame lines as "*The girl's amazing,*" my wife enthused with enhancements like *My wife closed her* [Matahannock-green-brown?] *eyes, shook her* [uh, very attractive? ruddy-cheeked? short-walnut-hair-framed?] *head, and* [um, enthused?] "*The girl's amazing!*"

Better yet, maybe go back and cut out all that river-name and gated-community stuff at the tale's front end and get right to the action: the day when a certain budding prankster/performance *artiste* proposed to her writing coach that instead of submitting to the class a manuscript of his own for *them* to criticize (as she'd heard I'd done once or twice in the past, half in jest, at semester's end), I should let her submit one of mine under *her* name—as if for a change she was making up her own sentences and paragraphs, characters and scenes, instead of rearranging and "performing" other people's, when in fact she wouldn't be! That way I'd get some *really* objective feedback, right? As could scarcely be expected otherwise, except from her outspoken self ("Too many parentheses and dashes, in this reader's opinion; not enough *texture*," etc.). Plus maybe submit as mine a story of hers: She'd try to hack out something conventional, maybe about life in a tacky gated community like Heron Bay Estates, or about a professor whose maverick student puts an additional small strain on his prevailingly quite happy marriage by teasing him with her "corpus" ... that sort of thing. Which is pretty much what Ms. "Cassandra Klause" did, Reader, at the time here told of—and here we go, almost.

Additional small strain, somebody just said, on a *prevailingly* happy marriage. Mandy's and mine has been that, for sure; keenly aware of each other's strengths and shortcomings, we feel much blessed in each other, on balance. But of course there've been trials, strains, bumps in our road: the undeniably disappointing atrophy of our separate literary talents, to which however we feel we have, on the whole, commendably accommodated; one serious temptation apiece, somewhere back there, to adultery—which however we each take credit for candidly acknowledging and, we swear, resisting; never mind the details. And our inevitably mixed feelings, as we've approached or reached the close of our academic careers, not to

mention of our lives, about what each and the other have accomplished, professionally and personally: about what we've done and not done, who we've been and not been, separately and together, during our joint single ride on life's not-always-merry-go-round. Hence those occasional small voltage surges above-noted: nothing that our coupled domestic wiring can't handle, as I'm confident we'd agree if we spoke of it, which we seldom do. Why bother? It's an electrical field potentiated over the past year by "Cassandra Klause" at one pole and at the other by my Shakespeare House "replacement," Professor Franklin Lee—who would've been introduced earlier into this "story" if it's "author" didn't have a chip on his shoulder with respect to that smug sonofabitch. That tight-assed, self-important asshole. That ...

Oh, that not untalented, not unhandsome, undeniably dedicated, generally quite capable and personable forty-five-year-old who joined the Stratford faculty half a dozen years ago upon the publication, two years before *that*, of his first (and eight years later still his only) novel—as utterly conservative, conventional, and unremarkable an item as it's corduroy-jacketed author, but (to give the devil his due) not a bad job, really: issued by a bona fide New York trade house, not an academic press, and politely enough received by it's handful of reviewers. Long since out of print, of course, but who among us isn't? A second novel allegedly still "going the rounds" up in Manhattan, and it's author altogether mum about what, if anything, he and his strait-laced muse have been up to since.

In short and for better or worse, the guy's one of us, toward whom Mandy feels less animus and more collegueship than does her spouse. "Frank Lee?" she'll tease when I get going like this on the subject. "Frank-ly, my dear, I don't give a damn, and neither should you." She's right, as usual, and I probably wouldn't, so much, except that it's been "Miz Klause's mizfortune," as that young woman herself puts it, to have Professor Lee as her official senior-year adviser, coach, and critic—and there, in her workshop mates' no doubt relieved opinion, go any hopes she might have entertained of so much as a long shot at this year's Shakespeare Prize.

But not in her own irrepressible estimation, nor in that of her FOF former coach. Shit, Reader (as Franklin Lee would never say): I'm no avant-gardist; would anytime rather read (or have written) the works of Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, or Scott Fitzgerald, e.g., than those of Gertrude Stein or the later James Joyce. About contemporary "experimental" fiction—interactive electronic hypertext and the like?—I have only the most dutiful, professorial curiosity. Or used to, anyhow, back in my professoring days: used to urge my Stratford charges to keep an open mind and interested eye on the edges of their medium's envelope, reminding them that like the highest and lowest

octaves on the classical eighty-eight-key piano—which, though rarely used, may be said to give a sort of resonant *optionality* to the middle octaves, making their use the composer's or performer's choice rather than a constraint—so likewise et cetera, you get the point. I therefore welcomed into my last year's workshop, after my initial startlement, the flagrantly unconventional "submissions" (misleading term!) of the apparently unscrupulous but actually strong-principled *faux-naïve provocateuse* "Cassandra Klause." The academic year that culminated last spring in *A Body of Words*, by Nom D. Plume had kicked off in the previous autumn with such unconventionalities as the opening pages of *Don Quixote* over the name "Pierre Menard" ("Borges's story, you know?" she had to explain to her baffled classmates. "About the guy who recomposes Cervantes's novel word for word?" They didn't get it); cribbed pages of a Joyce Carol Oates story signed "Toni Morrison," and vice versa (the "point" being that those two eminent Princeton colleagues must surely feel some rivalry, and might mischievously [etc.]); followed by other pointed or pointless but always transparent "plagiarisms" signed "The Grace of God," "The Way," "A Long Shot," "Extension," or "Bye Baby," leaving the reader to supply the missing "by." Never a sentence of her own composing, but invariably a presentation more original than anything else in the room, even when flagrantly cribbed, chopped, and reassembled from the previous week's workshopped efforts of her classmates and re-presented as [by] "D. Construction" or "Tryst-em Sandy." And then that *Body of Words*, which she openly declared to be her trial run for the Bard Award ("Hey, it's for the quote 'most impressive *body* of work' unquote, right?") and "performed" for a handful of fellow workshopers in her dorm room after it's preview by me and Mandy. And the "author" of these brazen stunts, mind, was an invariably unassuming, perky but shy-mannered young woman who also happened to be the most astute and candid yet diplomatic critic in the room (except perhaps for her coach) of her colleagues' literary efforts, so earnest but clunkily unimaginative by comparison.

One can readily imagine how less than edifying, instructive, or even entertaining Professor Franklin Lee found this sort of thing. In conference before the opening classes of her senior fall semester (my ex-student reported to me by e-mail), he pleasantly but firmly let her know that *his* Advanced Fiction Writing seminar, "unlike some," was no theater for avant-garde gimmickry, but a serious workshop in "the millennia-old art of rendering into language the human experience of life": more specifically, in the less ancient art of "inventing and constructing short dramatic prose narratives for print, involving Characters, Setting, Plot, and Theme, in the noble tradition of Poe and Maupassant through Hemingway and Faulkner, Eudora Welty and

Flannery O'Connor, to such contemporary masters of the form as Jorge Luis Borges and John Updike." If she found too constraining for her unconventional tastes a genre so splendidly various and accommodating (though rigorous), he advised, she should drop his course and sign up for something in the way of Experimental Theater, perhaps.

And when I pointed out to him that the Stratford catalogue doesn't offer any such courses [her e-message went on], he smirked that tweedy little smirk of his and said, "Maybe Professor Emeritus Newett will be willing to do some sort of Independent Study project with you in his retirement, unless his wife objects. If he isn't willing, or if she says no, it might just be that Stratford isn't really the right venue for you."In his class, however, while we were free to write in the comic or non-comic mode, the realistic or the fantastic, the traditional or the innovative, what we were going to make up and set down was STORIES, not "marginally interesting aesthetic points presented by non-narrative means."

So HELP!!!! (me, God) (And why wd yr wife object to a few extracurricular sessions, just you&me&my rambunctious muse, either somewhere on campus or maybe @ yr place, while Ms. Todd's meeting her classes ?) (Just kidding, Ma'am ;-)

Adieu¹⁰/0 (= Much Ado Over Nothing),

Yrs (truly), "CK"

"I personally think Frank has a point," opined Mandy when I showed her this message (she and I have no secrets from each other, that I know of). "And damn straight I object! She's so obviously coming on to you, whether she means it seriously or not." If I chose to celebrate my academic retirement by humping a coed forty-five years my junior, she added, thereby dishonoring our longtime solemn vow to keep hands off our students, I should go right the hell ahead, and there'd be "much adieu" indeed: adieu to our marriage and to my academic reputation, for starters. My call.

This-all said no more than half seriously, she crediting me with no such intentions. And of course I abandoned the notion of any such tête-à-tête tutorials, if I'd ever really half entertained it. But I maintained Cassie's and my e-mail connection, offering to show my wife any and all such communications if she wished to monitor them—which she hoped I was kidding even to suggest. Because, truth to tell, my previous year's exposure to "Nom D. Plume"'s "rambunctious muse" showed signs of stirring my own muse from her extended hibernation. During Klause's second junior-year semester with me, and over the following summer, I had found myself reviewing two decades'

worth of George Newett story-scripts (most of them rejected after serial submissions), including a half-dozen comparatively recent ones that I hadn't bothered to show Mandy. After my experience of "CK"'s freewheeling, no-holds-barred imagination, they all struck me as, well, earnest but clunky; "not untalented" but nowise exceptional; the sort of stuff that a Franklin Lee might produce, with none of the sparkle that marked Cassie's more imaginative perpetrations. Pallid rehashes, they were, of "the 3 Johns" (her dismissive label for Messrs. Cheever, O'Hara, and Updike): the muted epiphanies and petty nuances of upper-middle-class life in a not-all-that-upscale gated community on Maryland's endearingly funky Eastern Shore. Not impossibly, I had come to feel, some infusion of "CK"ish radicality might goose that muse of mine into rejuvenated action in my Golden Years, and George Newett would be remembered as a once-conventional and scarcely noticed writer who, in his Late Period, produced the refreshingly original works that belatedly made his name.

Meanwhile, however (not having lost my marbles altogether), I respected Frank Lee's ultimatum, sort of, or at least his right to declare it, as Amanda most certainly did as well. But I was determined to come to my former student's aid somehow or other. With some misgivings, therefore, I confided all the above to her by e-mail as her senior-year registration date approached, and we came up with a plan, mostly but by no means entirely hers, to kill several birds with one stone. So to speak? I would supply her with drafts of those unpublished and abandoned later stories of mine: the ones that not even Mandy had seen. She would then edit, revise, and/or rewrite them as much or as little as she chose and submit them to Professor Lee's workshop as her own, perhaps over such Klausean pen names as "John Uptight," "(Over A-)Cheever," "Scareless O'Hara"—surely Professor Lee wouldn't object to *that!* The payoff for me would be fresh input (including his) on those old efforts, for whatever that might be worth, which I could perhaps then re-revise and present to some book publisher as a story collection. For "Sandy," the reward would be her baccalaureate and a shot after all at the Shakespeare Prize (one of whose judges I still was, along with Mandy, Frank Lee, another literature professor, and the head of the English Department). In competition for which she would submit ... what? Perhaps a "body of work" comprising specimens of her provocative junior-year stunts, her senior-year experiments with conventional forms and straightforward realism, and some sort of capstone piece embodying both, to demonstrate her "Hegelian evolution" as a writer (her term for it), from Thesis versus Antithesis to a Synthesis triumphantly combining and transcending both.

Yes, well, reader of these strung-out pages: We did that, my star ex-coachee and I—unbeknownst to my wife, to Franklin Lee, and to my other Stratford ex-colleagues—and all parties were impressed. Ms. Klause had been, remember, the ablest critic in my workshop; now she showed herself to be by far the best editor/rewriter as well. Those ho-hum scribblings of mine took on a resonance, texture, and sparkle that they'd formerly manifested only here and there, if at all—on the strength of which example I dared hope to return to my long-abandoned second novel and CPR it back to new life. "Best damned writing student I ever had," Frank Lee marveled to Amanda and me over a colleguely lunch one April day in the Stratford Club, "by a factor of several!" He would never have guessed, he went on, that those jim-dandy stories that she had come up with for his workshop were Crazy Cassie's, if not for their jokey pen names—"which of course we will get rid of before she sends them off to *Harper's* and *The New Yorker*."

That winking, almost conspiratorial "we": So surprised and delighted was Fussy Frank by "our problem child's metamorphosis" that he generously included among its causes my earlier patient encouragement of her, along with his own "less permissive" standards. "Like Thesis and Antithesis, right?" he actually remarked to Mandy. "And she's our Synthesis." Hence the lunch-in-progress (his suggestion), to which he'd also invited my wife on the strength of her having rescued me a year ago from that *Body of Words*, by now a campus legend.

"I'll drink to that," she allowed, and raised her glass of faculty-club merlot to mine and to our colleague's de-alcoholized char-donnay (he had a class to teach that afternoon, he explained—but then, so did Mandy). As we nibbled our smoked-turkey-and-bean-sprout wraps, he even hinted, shyly, that if our joint protégée needed some extra cash this summer, he might actually hire her to review the typescript of his second novel and make editorial suggestions, so impressed was he by her acumen in that line. "Not that she'll likely be short on funds," he added with a chuckle—inasmuch as he would soon be presenting to the Prize Committee her assembled portfolio, which in his candid, considered, and confidential opinion need consist of nothing more than those half-dozen first-rate contributions to his senior seminar to make her a shoo-in for the Bard Award. "Who'd've thought, last September, that I'd hear myself saying that?"

I could have raised my hand, but of course did not. Among the things of which my lunchmates were unaware was that our Triumphant Synthesizing student's senior-year output included two items that would not appear in her portfolio: a story of mine that she

had submitted under her name to three good quarterlies simultaneously, without editing or revising it, as what she termed a "control" (all three had rejected it, as then had she), and one of her own under *my* name, programmatically imitative of my style, subject matter, and thematic preoccupations, but evidently superior to her model, as it was promptly accepted for publication by a lesser but still worthy periodical.

Consider it a thank-you for all you've done for me, the girl explained by e-mail when I (1) received the lit mag's baffling acceptance letter (she'd supplied my Heron Bay Estates address on the obligatory self-addressed stamped envelope), (2) made a puzzled inquiry of the editor, (3) quickly surmised what was afoot, (4) canceled the publication (at least under my name), (5) provided the actual author's name and address in case the magazine was still interested (it was, but would need to Inquire Further), and (6) demanded from that author an explanation of this latest jaw-dropper. *XOXO Mwah!*, her message signed off, cklaus2@strat-coll.edu.

Mwah my fat ass! I messaged back, demanding now both apology and cross-her-heart promise of no further such embarrassments—and at once regretted that angry imperative, to which she responded, *Just name the time and place, Coach. (And yours isn't all that fat, by the way: You shd see mine these days!;-)*

Aiyiyiyiyi: How to get out of this me-made mess, and this mess of a nonstory about it by Who Knows Whom: a "story" that opened so George Newett-like, with a serene little disquisition on Eastern Shore river and place names; that proceeded smoothly through a half-dozen pages on Stratford College and its problematical Bard Award, establishing en route its newly retired narrator/ protagonist and his not-yet-retired wife/colleague—and that then derailed just when it ought really to have got going, with the introduction of Conflict in the form of Troublesomely Brilliant Student "Cassandra Klaus"? Should FOF Newett now commit his maiden adultery, so to speak, by humping one of his not-quite-ex students—at her initiative, to be sure, but still ... —thereby blighting both his long happy marriage and his academic retirement, disgusting his colleagues and grown-up children, but perhaps reactivating (for what they're worth) his so-long-quiescent creative energies? And if so, so what? Or ought we to have the guy come to his moral senses (if necessary, since we've seen thus far no incontestable sign of his being *seriously* tempted by "CK"'s flagrances) and not only decline her seductive overtures but terminate altogether their somewhat sicko connection, make a clean breast of it to his faithful, so-patient Amanda before that breast gets irrevocably soiled,

and content himself with his writerly Failed-Old-Farthood and his inarguably good works as teacher and coach of future FOFs? But again: If so, so what?

Or could/should it turn out to be at least possibly the case that *nothing thus far here narrated has been the* (actual, nonfictive) *case*? And if so ...?

"Well of *course* it hasn't been, dumdum!" he imagines his frisky new sex mate teasing as he mounts her latest cleverly lettered performance piece, *Bartlett's Defamiliarized Quotations*, [by] "*Gosh & Golly*," the two of them on all fours on the faux-oriental living room rug in her new apartment, rented with a bit of her Shakespeare Prize money and her earnings as editorial assistant to Professor Franklin Lee. "Do I need to remind *you*, of all people, that this whole she-bang is a made-up story? There is no 'Cassie-Ass Klause' or Georgie-Boy Newett! No you, no me, no Frankie-Pank Lee! No StratColl dot e-d-u, nor any Bard Award! All just freaking fictions! So sock it to me, Coach! *Unh! Unh!*"

Yes, well: No thanks, *chérie*; not even in an Effing Fiction. And as for the question with which you're now about to pull the rug from under your narrator—How to wrap up a longish story that has no proper plot development anyhow? A story that for all one knows (or cares) may be being written by Not-Yet-Failed Fictionist Franklin Lee, say: beneath his corduroy camouflage a less straitjacketed writer than some mistake him to be, ha-ha, and longtime secret lover of a certain poet-colleague of his, ha-ha-ha, as well as of her pathetic husband's ex-protégée "CK," ha-ha-ha-ha! ...?

No problem, mate (ha-ha-ha-ha-ha & *UNH!*) ...:

THE END

Respectfully submitted to the Shakespeare Prize Committee [by]

"Hook R. Crook"

(Copywrong ☺ Twenty-Something [G. I. Newett])

Progressive Dinner

1. Hors D'oeuvres and Appetizers

"Hey, Rob! Hey, Shirley! Come on in, guys!"

"And the Beckers are right behind us. Hi-ho, Debbie! Hi-ho, Peter!"

"Come in, come in. Nametags on the table there, everybody. Drinks in the kitchen, goodies in the dining room and out on the deck. Yo there, Jeff and Marsha!"

"You made your taco dip, Sandy! Hooray! And Shirley brought those jalapeño thingies that Pete can't keep hands off of. Come on in, Tom and Patsy!"

TIME: The late afternoon/early evening of a blossom-rich late-May North Temperate Zone Saturday, half-a-dozen-plus springtimes into the new millennium. Warm enough for open doors and windows and for use of decks and patios, but not yet sultry enough to require air conditioning, and still too early for serious mosquitoes.

"So, did you folks see the Sold sign on the Feltons' place?"

"No! Since when?"

"Since this morning, Tom Hardison tells us. We'll ask Jeff Pitt when he and Marsha get here; he'll know what's what."

"The poor Feltons! We still can't get over it!"

"Lots of questions still unanswered there, for sure. Where d'you want this smoked bluefish spread, Deb?"

"In my mouth, just as soon as possible! Here, I'll take it; you guys go get yourself a drink. Hey there, Ashtons!"

PLACE: 908 Cattail Court, Rockfish Reach, Heron Bay Estates, Stratford, Avon County, upper Eastern Shore of Maryland, 21600: an ample and solidly constructed two-story hip-roofed dormer-windowed Dutch-colonial-style dwelling of white brick with black shutters and doors, slate roof, flagstone front walk and porch and patio, on "Rockfish Reach," off Heron Creek, off the Matahannock River, off Chesapeake Bay, off the North Atlantic Ocean, etc.

"So, Doctor Pete, what's your take on the latest bad news from Baghdad?"

"You know what I think, Tom. What all of us ivory-tower-liberal academics think: that we had no business grabbing that tar baby in the first place, but our president lied us into there and now we're stuck with it. Here's to you, friend."

"Yeah, well. Cheers? Hey, Peg, we all love our great new

mailboxes! You guys did a terrific job!"

"Didn't they, though? Those old wooden ones were just rotting away."

"And these new cast-metal jobs are even handsomer than the ones in Spartina Pointe. Good work, guys."

"You're quite welcome. Thanks for *this*, Deb and Pete and everybody. *Mmm!*"

"So where're the Pitts, I wonder?"

"Speak of the devil! Hi there, Marsha; hi-ho, Jeff! And you-all are ...?"

OCCASION: The now-traditional season-opening progressive dinner in Heron Bay's Rockfish Reach subdivision, a pleasantly laid out and landscaped two-decade-old neighborhood of some four dozen houses in various architectural styles, typically three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath affairs with attached two-car garage, screened or open porches, decks and/or patios, perhaps a basement, perhaps a boat dock, all on low-lying, marsh-fringed acre-and-a-half lots. Of the nearly fifty families who call the place home, most are empty-or all-but-empty-nesters, their children grown and flown. About half are more or less retired, although some still work out of home offices. Perhaps a third have second homes elsewhere, in the Baltimore/Washington or Wilmington/Philadelphia areas where they once worked, or in the Florida coastal developments whereto they migrate with other East Coast snowbirds for the winter. Half a dozen of the most community-spirited from the Reach's Shoreside Drive and it's adjacent Cattail and Loblolly Courts function as a neighborhood association, planning such community events and improvements as those above-mentioned dark green cast-metal mailboxes (paid for by a special assessment), the midsummer Rockfish Reach BYOB sunset cruise down the Matahannock from the Heron Bay Marina, and the fall picnic (in one of HBE's two pavilioned waterside parks) that unofficially closes the season unofficially opened by the progressive dinner, here in early progress.

As usual, invitation notices were distributed to all four dozen households a month before the occasion, rubber-banded to the decorative knobs atop those new mailboxes. Also as usual, between fifteen and twenty couples signed on and paid the \$40-per-person fee. Of the participating households (all of whom have been asked to provide, in addition to their fee, either an hors d'oeuvre/appetizer or a dessert, please indicate which), six or seven will have volunteered to be hosts: one for the buffet-and-bar opening course presently being enjoyed by all hands, perhaps four

for the sit-down entrée (supplied by a Stratford caterer; check your nametag to see which entrée house you've been assigned to), and one for the all-together-again dessert buffet that winds up the festive occasion. The jollity of which, this spring, has been somewhat beclouded—as was that of last December's Rockfish Reach "Winter Holiday" party—by the apparent double suicide, still unexplained, of Richard and Susan Felton (themselves once active participants in these neighborhood events) by exhaust-fume inhalation in their closed garage at 1020 Shoreside Drive, just after Tom and Patsy Hardison's elaborate toga party last September to inaugurate their new house on Loblolly Court. Recommended dress for the progressive dinner is "country club casual": slacks and sport shirts for the gentlemen (jackets optional); pants or skirts and simple blouses for the ladies.

"Hi there. Jeff insists that we leave it to him to do the honors."

"And to apologize for this late addition to the guest list, *and* to fill in the nametags—all courtesy of Avon Realty, guys, where we agents do our best to earn our commissions. *May I have your attention, everybody?* This handsome young stud and his blushing bride are your new about-to-be neighbors Joe and Judy Barnes, formerly and still temporarily from over in Blue Crab Bight but soon to move into Number Ten-Twenty Shoreside Drive! Joe and Judy, this is Dean Peter Simpson, from the College, and his soulmate Deborah, also from the College."

"Welcome to Rockfish Reach, Joe and Judy. What a pleasant surprise!"

"Happy to be here ... Dean and Mrs. Simpson."

"Please, guys. We're Debbie and Pete."

"*Lovely* house, Debbie! And do forgive us for showing up empty-handed. Everything happened so *fast*!"

"No problem, no problem. If I know Marsha Pitt, she's probably brought an hors d'oeuvre *and* a dessert."

"Guilty as charged, Your Honor. Cheesecake's in the cooler out in our car for later at the Greens'; I'll put these doodads out with the rest of the finger food."

"And *your* new house is a lovely one too, Judy and Joe. Pete and I have always admired that place."

"Thanks for saying so. Our daughters are convinced it'll be haunted! One of them's up at the College, by the way, and her kid sister will be joining her there next year, but they'll still be coming home most weekends and such."

"We hope!"

"Oh my, how *wonderful* ... Excuse me ..."

"So! Go on in, people. Jeff and Marsha will introduce you around, and we'll follow shortly."

"Aye-aye, Cap'n. The Barneses will be doing their entrée with us, by the way. We've got plenty of extra seating, and they've promised not to say that our house is the Pitts'."

"Ai, sweetheart, you promised not to resurrect that tired old joke! Come on, Joe and Judy, let's get some wine."

("You okay, hon?"

"I'll make it. But that daughters thing really hit home."

"Yup. Here's a Kleenex. On with the party?"")

HOSTS: The "associates": Deborah Clive Simpson, fifty-seven, associate librarian at Stratford College's Dexter Library, and Peter Alan Simpson, also fifty-seven, longtime professor of humanities and presently associate dean at that same quite good small institution, traditionally a liberal-arts college but currently expanding its programs in the sciences, thanks to a munificent bequest from a late alumnus who made a fortune in the pharmaceuticals business. The Simpsons are childless, their only offspring, a much-prized daughter, having been killed two years ago in a multicar crash on the Baltimore Beltway during an ice storm in the winter of her sophomore year as a premedical student at Johns Hopkins. Her loss remains a trauma from which her parents do not expect ever to recover; the very term "closure," so fashionable nowadays, sets their teeth on edge, and the coinciding of Julie's death and Peter's well-earned promotion to associate dean has leached much pleasure from the latter. Nevertheless, in an effort to "get on with their lives," the Simpsons last year exchanged their very modest house in Stratford—so rich in now-painful memories of child-rearing and of the couple's advancement up the academic ladder from relative penury to financial comfort—for their present Rockfish Reach address, and they're doing their best to be active members of both their collegiate and their residential communities as well as generous supporters of such worthy organizations as Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières), to which it had been Julie's ambition to devote herself once she attained her M.D.

"So we bet those new folks—what's their name?"

"Barnes. Joe and Judy. He's with Lucas and Jones in Stratford, and she teaches at the Fenton School. They seem nice."

"We bet they got themselves a bargain on the Feltons' place."

"More power to 'em, I say. All's fair in love, war, and real estate."

"Don't miss Peggy Ashton's tuna spread, Rob; I'm going for another white wine spritzer."

"Make that two, okay? But no spritz in mine, please. So, Lisa: What were you starting to say about the nametags?"

"Oh, just that looking around at tonight's tags reminded me that friends of ours over in Oyster Cove told us once that nine out of ten husbands in Heron Bay Estates are called by one-syllable first names and their wives by two-syllable ones: You Rob-and-Shirley, we Dave-and-Lisa, et cetera."

"Hey, that's right. I hadn't noticed!"

"And what exactly does one make of that sociocultural infobit, *s'il vous plait*?"

"I'll let you know, Pete-and-Debbie, soon's I figure it out. *Meanwhile* ..."

"What *I* notice, guys—every time I'm in the supermarket or Wal-Mart?—is that more and more older and overweight Americans—"

"Like us?"

"Like some of us, anyhow—go prowling down the aisles bent forward like *this*, with arms and upper body resting on their shopping cart as if it was some kind of a walker ..."

"And their fat butts wagging, often in pink warmup pants ..."

"Now is that nice to say?"

"It's what Pete calls the American Consumer Crouch. *I* say 'Whatever floats your boat ...'"

"*And* keeps the economy perking along. Am I right, Joe Barnes?"

"Right you are, Jeff."

"So, Deb, *you* were saying something earlier about a long letter that Pete got out of the blue from some girl in Uganda?"

"Oh, right, wow: *that* ..."

"Uganda?"

"I should let Pete tell you about it. Where are you and Paul doing your entrée?"

"Practically next door. At the Beckers'?"

"Us too. So he'll explain it there. Very touching—but who knows whether it's for real or a scam? Oh, hey, Pat: Have you and Tom met the Barneses? Joe and Judy Barnes, Tom and Patsy Hardison from Loblolly Court."

"Jeff Pitt introduced us already, Deb. Hello again, Barneses."

"Hi there. We've been hearing great things about your Toga Party last fall! Sounds cool!"

"All but the ending, huh? We can't *imagine* what happened with

Dick and Susan Felton that night ..."

"Has to've been some kind of freak accident; let's don't spoil this party with that one. Welcome to Rockfish Reach!"

"Joe and I love it already. And your place on Loblolly Court is just incredible!"

"Jeff pointed it out to us when we first toured the neighborhood. Really magnificent!"

"Thanks for saying so. An eyesore, some folks think, but it's what we wanted, so we built it. You're the new boss at Lucas and Jones, in town?"

"I am—and *my* boss, over in Baltimore, is the guy who stepped on lots of folks' toes with that teardown over in Spartina Pointe. Maybe you know him: Mark Matthews?"

"Oh, we know Mark, all right. A man after my own heart."

"Mine too, Tom. Decide what you want, go for it, and let the chips fall where they may."

"Well, now, people: Excuse me for butting in, but to us lonely left-wing-Democrat dentist types, that sounds a lot like our current president and his gang."

"Whoa-ho, Doctor David! Let's not go there, okay? This is Lisa Bergman's husband Dave, guys. He pulls teeth for a living."

"And steps on toes for fun. Pleased to meet you, folks."

"Entrée time in twenty minutes, everybody! Grab yourselves another sip and nibble, check your tags for your sit-down-dinner address, and we'll all reconvene for dessert with the Greens at nine!"

"So, that Barnes couple: Are they golfers, d'you know?"

2. Entrée

The assembled now disperse from the Simpsons' to shift their automobiles or stroll on foot to their various main-course addresses, their four host-couples having left a bit earlier to confirm that all is ready and to be in place to greet their guests. Of these latter, four will dine with George and Carol Walsh on Shoreside Drive; six (including the newcomer Barneses) with Jeff and Marsha Pitt, also on Shoreside; eight (the Ashtons, Bergmans, Greens, and Simpsons) with Pete and Debbie's Cattail Court near-neighbors Charles and Sandy Becker; and ten with Tom and Patsy Hardison over on Loblolly Court. Stratford Catering's entrée menu for the evening is simple but well prepared: a caesar salad with optional anchovies, followed by Maryland crabcakes with garlic mashed potatoes and a steamed broccoli-zucchini mix, the vegetables cooked in advance and reheated, the crabcakes prepared in advance but griddled on-site, three minutes on each side, and the whole accompanied by mineral water and one's choice of pinot grigio or iced tea.

The Becker group all go on foot, chatting together as they pass under the streetlights in the mild evening air, their destination being just two houses down from the Simpsons' on the opposite side of the cul-de-sac "court." To no one in particular, Shirley Green remarks, "Somebody was wondering earlier whether the Barneses got a bargain price on the Feltons' house? None of our business, but *I* can't help wondering whether the Beckers' house number affects *their* property value."

"Aiyi," Peggy Ashton exclaims in mock dismay. "*Nine-Eleven* Cattail Court! I hadn't thought of that!"

If *he* were Chuck Becker, Rob Green declares to the group, he'd use that unfortunate coincidence to appeal their property-tax assessment. "I mean, hell, Dick and Susan Felton were just two people, rest their souls. Whereas, what was it, three *thousand* and some died on Nine-Eleven? That ought to count for something."

His wife punches his shoulder. "Rob, I *swear!*"

Walking backward to face the group, he turns up his palms: "Can't help it, folks. We accountants try to take everything into account."

Hisses and groans. Peter Simpson takes his wife's hand as they approach their destination. He's relieved that the Barneses, although certainly pleasant-seeming people, won't be at table with them for the sit-down dinner to distress Debbie further with innocent talk of their college-age daughters.

The Beckers' house, while no *palazzo* like the Hardisons, is an

imposing two-story white-brick colonial, it's columned central portico flanked by a guest wing on one side and a garage wing on the other, with two large doors for cars and a smaller one for golf cart and bicycles. The eight guests make their way up the softly lighted entrance drive to the brightly lit main entry to be greeted by ruddy-hefty, bald-pated, silver-fringed Charles Becker, a politically conservative septuagenarian with the self-assured forcefulness of the CEO he once was, and his no-longer-sandy-haired Sandy, less vigorous of aspect after last year's successful surgery for a "growth" on her left lung, but still active in the Neighborhood Association, her Episcopal church in Stratford, and the Heron Bay Club. Once all have been welcomed and seated in the Beckers' high-ceilinged dining room, the drinks poured, and the salad served, their host taps his water glass with a table knife for attention and says, "Let's take hands and bow our heads for the blessing, please."

The Simpsons, seated side by side at his right hand, glance at each other uncomfortably, they being nonbelievers, and at the Bergmans, looking equally discomfited across the table from them. More for their sake than for her own, Debbie asks, as if teasingly, "Whatever happened to the separation of church and dinner party?" To which Charles Becker replies smoothly, "In a Christian household, do as the Christians do," and takes her left hand in his right and Lisa Bergman's right in his left. David shrugs his eyebrows at Pete and goes along with it, joining hands with his wife on one side and with Shirley Green on the other. Peter follows suit, taking Debbie's right hand in his left and Peggy Ashton's left in his right; but the foursome neither close eyes nor lower heads with the others while their host intones: "Be present at our table, Lord. / Be here and everywhere adored. / These mercies bless, and grant that we / May feast in Paradise with Thee. Amen."

"And," Paul Ashton adds at once to lighten the little tension at the table, "grant us stomach-room enough for this entrée after all those appetizers!"

"Amen and *bon appétit*," proposes Sandy Becker, raising her wineglass. "Everybody dig in, and then I'll do the crabcakes while Chuck serves up the veggies."

"Such appetizers they were!" Lisa Bergman marvels, and then asks Paul whether he happens, like her, to be a Gemini. He is, in fact, he replies: "Got a birthday coming up next week. Why?"

"Because," Lisa declares, "it's a well-known fact that we Geminis prefer hors d'oeuvres to entrées. No offense intended, Sandy and Chuck!"

Her husband winks broadly. "It's true even in bed, so I've heard—

no offense intended, Paul and Lisa."

Sipping their drinks and exchanging further such teases and pleasantries, all hands duly address the caesar salad, the passed-around optional anchovy fillets, and the pre-sliced baguettes. Although tempted to pursue what she regards as presumption on their host's part that everyone in their community is a practicing Christian, or that because the majority happen to be, any others should join in uncomplainingly, Debbie Simpson holds her tongue—as she did not when, for example, the Neighborhood Association proposed Christmas lights last winter on the entrance signs to Rockfish Reach (she won that one, readily granting the right of all residents to decorate their houses, but not community property, with whatever religious symbols they cared to display), and when the Heron Bay Estates Community Association put up its large Christmas tree at the development's main gatehouse (that one she lost, and at Pete's request didn't pursue it, they being new residents whom he would prefer not be branded as troublemakers). She gives his left hand a squeeze by way of assuring him that she's letting the table-grace issue drop.

"So tell us about that strange letter you got, Pete," Peggy Ashton proposes. "From Uganda, was it? That Deb mentioned during appetizers?"

"Uganda?" the hostess marvels, or anyhow asks.

"Very strange," Peter obligingly tells the table. "I suppose we've all gotten crank letters now and then—get-rich scams in Liberia and like that?—but this one was really different." To begin with, he explains, it wasn't a photocopied typescript like the usual mass-mailed scam letter, but a neatly handwritten appeal on two sides of a legal-size ruled sheet, with occasional cross-outs and misspellings. Polite, articulate, and addressed to "Dear Friend," it was or purported to be from a seventeen-year-old Ugandan girl, the eldest of five children, whose mother had died in childbirth and whose father had succumbed to AIDS. Since their parents' death, the siblings have been lodged with an uncle, also suffering from AIDS and with five children of his own. Those he dresses properly and sends to school, the letter writer declares, but she and her four brothers and sisters are treated harshly by him and his wife, who "don't recognize [them] as human beings." Dismissed from school for lack of fee money and provided with "only two clothes each" to wear and little or nothing to eat, they are made to graze the family's goats, feed the pigs, and do all the hard and dirty housework from morning till night. In a few months, when she turns eighteen, she'll be obliged to become one of some man's several wives, a fate she fears both because of the AIDS epidemic and because it will leave her siblings unprotected. Having (unlike them) completed her secondary education before their father's death, she appeals to her

"dear Friend" to help her raise 1,500 euros to "join university for a degree in education" and 1,200 euros for her siblings to finish high school. Attached to the letter was a printed deposit slip from Barclays Bank of Uganda, complete with the letter writer's name and account number, followed by the stipulation "F/O CHILDREN."

"How she got *my* name and address, I can't imagine," Pete concludes to the hushed and attentive table. "If it was in some big general directory or academic Who's Who, how'd she get hold of it, and how many hundreds of these things did she write out by hand and mail?"

"And where'd she get paper and envelopes and deposit slips and postage stamps," Lisa Bergman wonders, "if they're so dirt poor?"

"And the time to scribble scribble scribble," Paul Ashton adds, "while they're managing the goats and pigs and doing all the scut-work?"

Opines Rob the Accountant, "It doesn't add up."

"It does seem questionable," Sandy Becker agrees.

"But if you could see the letter!" Debbie protests. "So earnest and articulate, but so unslick! Lines like 'We do not hope that our uncle will recover.' And 'I can't leave my siblings alone. We remained five and we should stick five.'"

Taking her hand in his again and using his free hand to make finger quotes, Pete adds, "And, quote, 'Life unbearable, we only pray hard to kind people to help us go back to school, because the most learnt here is more chance of getting good job,' end of quote."

"It's heartbreaking," Shirley Green acknowledges. "No wonder you-all have so much of it memorized!"

"But the bottom line is," Chuck Becker declares, "did you fall for it? Because, believe me, it's a goddamn scam."

"You really think so?" Dave Bergman asks.

"Of course it is! Some sharpster with seven wives and Internet access for tracking down addresses sets his harem to scribbling out ten copies per wife per day, carefully misspelling a few words and scratching out a few more, just to see who'll take the bait. Probably some midlevel manager at Barclays with a PC in his office and a fake account in one of his twelve daughters' names."

"How can you be so *sure*?" Lisa Bergman wants to know.

With the air of one accustomed to having his word taken, "Take my word for it, sweetie," their host replies. Down-table to his wife then, "Better get the crabcakes started, Sandy?" And to the Simpsons, "Please tell me you didn't send 'em a nickel."

"We didn't," Debbie assures him. "Not yet, anyhow. Because of

course we're leery of the whole thing too. But just suppose, Chuck and everybody—just *suppose* it happens to be authentic? Imagine the courage and resourcefulness of a seventeen-year-old girl in that wretched situation, with all that traumatic stuff behind her and more of it waiting down the road, but she manages somehow to get hold of a bunch of American addresses and a pen and paper and stamps and deposit slips, and she scratches out this last-chance plea for a *life* ... Suppose it's for real?"

"And we-all sit here in our gated community," Lisa Bergman joins in, "with our Lexuses and golf carts and our parties and progressive dinners, and we turn up our noses and say, 'It's a scam; don't be suckered.'"

"So what *should* we do?" Paul Ashton mildly challenges her. "Bet a hundred bucks apiece on the *very* long shot that it's not a shyster?"

"I'm almost willing to," Shirley Green admits. Her husband shakes his head no.

"What we *ought* to do," Dave Bergman declares, "is go to some trouble to find out whether the thing's for real. A *lot* of trouble, if necessary. Like write back to her, telling her we'd like to help but we need more bona fides. Find out how she got Pete's name and address. Ask the American consulate in Kampala or wherever to check her story out. Is that in Uganda?"

"You mean," his wife wonders or suggests, "make a community project out of it?"

Asks Debbie, "Why not?"

"Because," Rob Green replies, "I, for one, don't have time for it. Got a full plate already." He checks his watch. "Or soon will have, won't we, Shirl?"

"Same here," Dave Bergman acknowledges. "I know I ought to *make* time for things like this, but I also know I won't. It's like demonstrating against the war in Iraq, the way so many of us did against the war in Vietnam? Or even like working to get out the vote on Election Day. My hat's off to people who act that strongly on their convictions, and I used to be one of them, but I've come to accept that I'm just *not* anymore. Morally lazy these days, I guess, but at least honest about it."

"And in this case," Chuck Becker says with ruddy-faced finality, "you're saving yourself a lot of wasted effort. Probably in those other cases too, but never mind that."

"Oh my goodness," his wife exclaims. "Look what time it is! I'll do the crabcakes, Chuck'll get the veggies, and Paul, would you mind refreshing everybody's drinks? Or we'll never get done before it's time to move on to Rob and Shirley's!"

3. Dessert

The Greens' place on Shoreside Drive, toward which all three dozen progressive diners now make their well-fed way from the several entrée houses to reassemble for the dessert course, is no more than a few blocks distant from the Becker and Simpson residences on Cattail Court—although the attractively winding streets of Heron Bay Estates aren't really measurable in blocks. Chuck and Sandy Becker, who had earlier walked from their house to Pete and Debbie Simpson's (practically next door) for the appetizer course, and then back to their own place to host the entrée, decide now to drive to the final course of the evening in their Cadillac Escalade. The Greens themselves, having left the Beckers' a quarter-hour earlier to make ready, drove also, retrieving their Honda van from where they'd parked it in front of the Simpsons'. The Ashtons, Paul and Peggy, walk only far enough to collect their Lexus from the Simpsons' driveway and then motor on. Of the five couples who did their entrée at 911 Cattail Court, only the Simpsons themselves and the Bergmans decide that the night air is too inviting not to stroll through it to Rob and Shirley's; they decline the proffered lifts in favor of savoring the mild westerly breeze, settling their crabcakes and vegetables a bit before tackling the dessert smorgasbord, and chatting among themselves en route.

"That Chuck, I swear," Lisa Bergman says as the Beckers' luxury SUV rolls by. "So *sure* he's right about everything! And Sandy just goes along with it."

"Maybe she agrees with him," Peter suggests. "Anyhow, they're good neighbors, even if Chuck can be borderline insufferable now and then."

"I'll second that," Dave Bergman grants. Not to walk four abreast down a nighttime street with no sidewalks, the two men drop back a bit to carry on their conversation while their wives, a few feet ahead, speak of other things. Charles Becker, David goes on, likes to describe himself as a self-made man, and in considerable measure he is: from humble beginnings as a small-town carpenter's son—

"Sounds sort of familiar," Peter can't help commenting, "except our Chuck's not about to let himself get crucified."

"Anyhow, served in the Navy during World War Two; came home and went to college on the G.I. Bill to study engineering; worked a few years for a suburban D.C. contractor in the postwar housing boom; then started his own business and did very well indeed, as he does not tire of letting his dentist and others know. No hand-scrawled Send Me Money letters for *him*: 'God helps those who help themselves,' et

cetera."

"Right: the way he helped himself to free college tuition and other benefits not readily available to your average Ugandan orphan girl. Hey, look: Sure enough, there's Jeff Pitt's latest score."

Peter means the Sold sticker on the For Sale sign (with *The Jeff Pitt Team* lettered under it) in front of 1020 Shoreside Drive, the former residence of Richard and Susan Felton. The women, too, pause before it—their conversation having moved from the Beckers to the Bergmans' Philadelphia daughter's latest project for her parents: to establish a Jewish community organization in Stratford, in alliance with the College's modest Hillel club for its handful of Jewish students. Lisa is interested; David isn't quite convinced that the old town is ready yet for that sort of thing.

"The Feltons," he says now, shaking his head. "I guess we'll never understand."

"What do you mean?" Debbie challenges him. "I think *I* understand it perfectly well."

"What do *you* mean?" David cordially challenges back. "They were both in good health, comfortably retired, no family problems that anybody knows of, well liked in the neighborhood—and *wham*, they come home from the Hardisons' toga party and off themselves!"

"And," Peter adds, "their son and daughter not only get the news secondhand, with no advance warning and no note of explanation or apology, but then have to put their own lives on hold and fly in from wherever to dispose of their parents' bodies and house and belongings."

"What a thing to lay on your kids!" Lisa agrees. The four resume walking the short remaining distance to the Greens'. "And you think that's just fine, Deb?"

"Not 'just fine,'" Debbie counters: "*understandable*. And I agree that their kids deserved some explanation, if maybe not advance notice, since then they'd've done all they could to prevent it's happening." What she means, she explains, is simply that she quite understands how a couple at the Feltons' age and stage—near or in their seventies after a prevailingly happy, successful, and disaster-free life together, their children and grandkids grown and scattered, the family's relations reportedly affectionate but not especially close, the parents' careers behind them along with four decades of good marriage, nothing better to look forward to than the infirmities, losses, and burdensome care-taking of old age, and no religious prohibitions against self-termination—how such a couple might just decide, Hey, it's been a good life; we've been lucky to have had it and each other all these years; let's end it peacefully and painlessly before things go

downhill, which is really the only way they can go from here.

"And let our friends and neighbors and children clean up the mess?" David presses her. "Would you and Pete do that to us?"

"Count *me* out," Peter declares. "For another couple decades anyhow, unless the world goes to hell even faster than it's going now."

"In our case," his wife reminds the Bergmans, "it's friends, neighbors, and *colleagues*. Don't think we haven't talked about it more than once since Julie's death. I've even checked it out on the Web, for when the time comes."

"On the *Web*?" Lisa takes her friend's arm.

Surprised, concerned, and a little embarrassed, "The things you learn about your mate at a progressive dinner!" Peter marvels to David, who then jokingly complains that he hasn't learned a single interesting thing so far about *his* mate.

"Don't give up on me," his wife says. "The party's not over."

"Right you are," Debbie agrees, "literally and figuratively. And here we are, and I'll try to shut up."

The Greens' house, brightly lit, with a dozen or more cars now parked before it, is a boxy two-story beige vinyl-clapboard-sided affair, unostentatious but commodious and well maintained, with fake-shuttered windows all around, and on it's creek side a large screened porch, open patio, pool, and small-boat dock. Shirley Green being active in the Heron Bay Estates Garden Club, the property is handsomely landscaped: The abundant rhododendrons, azaleas, and flowering trees have already finished blossoming for the season, but begonias, geraniums, daylilies, and roses abound along the front walk and driveway, around the foundation, and in numerous planters. As the foursome approach, the Bergmans tactfully walk a few paces ahead. Peter takes his wife's arm to comfort her.

"Sorry," Debbie apologizes again. "You know I wouldn't be thinking these things if we hadn't lost Julie." Her voice thickens. "She'd be fresh out of college now and headed for med school!" She can say no more.

"I know, I know." As indeed Peter does, having been painfully reminded of that circumstance as he helped preside over Stratford's recent commencement exercises instead of attending their daughter's at Johns Hopkins. Off to medical school she'd be preparing herself to go, for arduous but happy years of general training, then specialization, internship, and residency; no doubt she'd meet and bond with some fellow physician-in-training along the way, and Peter and Debbie would help plan the wedding with her and their prospective son-in-law and look forward to grandchildren down the line to brighten their elder years, instead of Googling "suicide" on the Web ...

Briefly but appreciatively she presses her forehead against his shoulder. Preceded by the Bergmans and followed now by other dessert-course arrivers, they make their way front-doorward to be greeted by eternally boyish Rob and ever-effervescent Shirley Green.

"Sweets are out on the porch, guys; wine and decaf in the kitchen. Beautiful evening, isn't it?"

"Better enjoy it while we can, I guess, before the hurricanes come."

"Yo there, Barneses! What do you think of your new neighborhood so far?"

"Totally awesome! Nothing like this in Blue Crab Bight."

"We can't wait to move in, ghosts or no ghosts. Our daughter Tiffany's off to France for six weeks, but it's the rest of the family's summer project."

"So enjoy every minute of it. Shall we check out the goodies, Deb?"

"Calories, here we come! Excuse us, people."

But over chocolate cheesecake and decaffeinated coffee on the torch-lit patio, Judy Barnes reapproaches Debbie to report that Marsha Pitt, their entrée hostess, told them the terrible news of the Simpsons' daughter's accident. "Joe and I are so sorry for you and Peter! We can't *imagine ...*"

All appetite gone, "Neither can we," Debbie assures her. "We've quit trying to."

And just a few minutes later, as the Simpsons are conferring on how soon they can leave without seeming rude, Paul and Peggy Ashton come over, each with a glass of pale sherry in one hand and a chocolate fudge brownie in the other, to announce their solution to that Ugandan orphan girl business.

"Can't wait to hear it," Peter says dryly. "Will Chuck Becker approve?"

"Chuck shmuck," says Paul, who has picked up a few Yiddishisms from the Bergmans. "The folks who brought you your dandy new mailboxes now propose a Rockfish Reach Ad Hoc Search and Rescue Committee. Tell 'em, Peg."

She does, emphasizing her points with a half-eaten brownie. The informal committee's initial members would be the three couples at dinner who seemed most sympathetic to Pete's story and to the possibility that the letter was authentic: themselves, the Bergmans, and of course the Simpsons. Peter would provide them with copies of the letter; Paul Ashton, whose legal expertise was at their service, would find out how they could go about verifying the thing's authenticity, as David Bergman had suggested at the Beckers'. If it turned out to be for real, they would then circulate an appeal through

Rockfish Reach, maybe through all of Heron Bay Estates, to raise money toward the girl's rescue: not a blank check that her uncle and aunt might oblige her to cash for their benefit, but some sort of tuition fund that the committee could disburse, or at least oversee and authorize payments from.

"Maybe even a scholarship at Stratford?" Paul Ashton suggests to Peter. "I know you have a few foreign students from time to time, but none from equatorial Africa, I'll bet."

"Doesn't sound impossible, actually," Peter grants, warming to the idea while at the same time monitoring his wife's reaction. "*If* she's legit, and qualified. Our African-American student organization could take her in."

"And our Heron Bay Search and Rescue Squad could unofficially adopt her!" Lisa Bergman here joins in, whom the Ashtons have evidently briefed already on their proposal. "Having another teenager to keep out of trouble will make us all feel young again! Whatcha think, Deb?"

To give her time to consider, Peter reminds them that there remains the problem of the girl's younger siblings, whom she's resolved not to abandon: "We remained five and we should stick five," et cetera. Whereas if she "went to university" in Kampala for at least the first couple of years, say, she could see the youngsters into high school and then maybe come to Stratford for her junior or senior year

...

"Listen to us!" He laughs. "And we don't even know yet whether the girl's for real!"

"But we can find out," David Bergman declares. "And if we can make it happen, or make something *like* it happen, it'll be a credit to Heron Bay Estates. Make us feel a little better about our golf and tennis and progressive dinners. Okay, so it's only one kid out of millions, but at least it's one. I say let's do it."

"And then Pete and I officially adopt her as our daughter," Debbie says at last, in a tone that her husband can't assess at all, "and we stop eating our hearts out about losing Julie, and everybody lives happily ever after."

"Deb?" Lisa puts an arm around her friend's shoulder.

"Alternatively," Debbie suggests to them then, "we could start a Dick and Susan Felton Let's Get It Over With Club, and borrow the Barneses' new garage for our first meeting. Meanwhile, let's enjoy the party, okay?" And she moves off toward where the Pitts, the Hardisons, and a few others are chatting beside the lighted pool. To their friends Peter turns up his palms, as best one can with a cup of decaf in one hand and it's saucer in the other, and follows after his

wife, wondering and worrying what lies ahead for them—tonight, tomorrow, and in the days and years beyond. They have each other, their work, their colleagues and friends and neighbors, their not-all-that-close extended family (parents dead, no siblings on Debbie's side, one seven-years-older sister of Peter's out in Texas, from whom he's been more or less distanced for decades), their various pastimes and pleasures, their still prevailingly good health—for who knows how much longer? And then. And then. While over in Uganda and Darfur, and down in Haiti, and in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib and the world's multitudinous other hellholes ...

"They had *nothing* like this back in Blue Crab Bight, man!" he hears Joe Barnes happily exclaiming to the Greens. "Just a sort of block party once, and that was it."

"Feltons or no Feltons," Judy Barnes adds, "we've made the right move."

Nearby, florid Chuck Becker is actually thrusting a forefinger at David Bergman's chest: "We cut and run from I-raq now, there'll be hell to pay. Got to *stay the course*."

"Like we did in Nam, right?" unintimidated Dave comes back at him. "And drill the living shit out of Alaska and the Gulf Coast, I guess you think, if that's what it takes to get the last few barrels of oil? Gimme a break, Chuck!"

"Take it from your friendly neighborhood realtor, folks," Jeff Pitt is declaring to the Ashtons: "Whatever you have against a second Bay bridge—say, from south Baltimore straight over to Avon County?—it'll raise your property values a hundred percent in no time at all, the way the state's population is booming. We won't be able to build condos and housing developments fast enough to keep up!"

Peggy Ashton: "So there goes the neighborhood, right? And it's bye-bye Chesapeake Bay ..."

Paul: "*And* bye-bye national forest lands and glaciers and polar ice caps. Get me outta here!"

Patsy Hardison, to Peter's own dear Deborah: "So, did you and Pete see that episode that Tom mentioned before, that he and all the TV critics thought was so great and I couldn't even watch? I suspect it's a Mars-versus-Venus thing."

"Sorry," Debbie replies. "We must be the only family in Heron Bay Estates that doesn't get HBO." Her eyes meet Peter's, neutrally.

Chuckling and lifting his coffee cup in salute as he joins the pair, "We don't even have *cable*," Peter confesses. "Just an old-style antenna up on the roof. Now is that academic snobbishness or what?" He sets cup and saucer on a nearby table and puts an arm about his wife's waist, a gesture that she seems neither to welcome nor to resist. He

has no idea where their lives are headed. Quite possibly, he supposes, she doesn't either.

Up near the house, an old-fashioned post-mounted school bell clangs: The Greens use it to summon grandkids and other family visitors in for meals. Rob Green, standing by it, calls out, "Attention, all hands!" And when the conversation quiets, "Just want to remind you to put the Rockfish Reach sunset cruise on your calendars: Saturday, July fifteenth, Heron Bay Marina, seven to nine P.M.! We'll be sending out reminders as the time approaches, but *save the date*, okay?"

"Got it," Joe Barnes calls back from somewhere nearby: "July fifteenth, seven P.M."

From the porch Chuck Becker adds loudly, "God bless us all! And God bless America!"

Several voices murmur "Amen." Looking up and away with a sigh of mild annoyance, Peter Simpson happens at just that moment to see a meteor streak left to right across the moonless, brightly constellated eastern sky.

So what? he asks himself.

So nothing.

Us/Them

TO HIS WIFE, his old comrades at the *Avon County News*, or his acquaintances from over at the College, Gerry Frank might say, for example, "Flaubert once claimed that what he'd *really* like to write is a novel about Nothing." In his regular feature column, however—in the small-town weekly newspaper of a still largely rural Maryland county—it would have to read something like this:

FRANK OPINIONS, by Gerald Frank

Us/Them

The celebrated 19th-century French novelist Gustave Flaubert, author of *Madame Bovary*, once remarked that what he would *really* like to write is a novel about Nothing.

After which he might acknowledge that the same was looking to be the case with this week's column, although it's author still hoped to make it not quite about Nothing, but rather ("as the celebrated Elizabethan poet/playwright William Shakespeare put it in the title of one of his comedies") about *Much Ado About Nothing*.

There: That should work as a lead, a hook, a kick-start from which the next sentences and paragraphs will flow (pardon Gerry's mixed metaphor)—and voilà, another "Frank Opinions" column to be e-mailed after lunch to Editor Tom Chadwick at the *News* and put to bed for the week.

But they *don't* come, those next sentences—*haven't* come, now, for the third work-morning in a row—for the ever-clearer reason that their semiretired would-be author hasn't figured out yet what he wants to write about what he wants to write about, namely: Us(/)Them. *In Frank's opinion*, he now types experimentally in his column's characteristic third-person viewpoint, *what he needs is a meaningful connection between the "Us/ Them" theme, much on his mind lately for reasons presently to be explained, and either or all of (1) a troubling disconnection, or anyhow an increasing distinction/difference/ whatever, between, on this side of that slash, him and his wife—Gerald and Joan Frank, 14 Shad Run Road #212, Heron Bay Estates, Stratford, MD 21600—and on it's other side their pleasant gated community in general and their Shad Run condominium neighborhood in particular; (2) his recently increasing difficulty—after so many productive decades of newspaper work!—in coming up with fresh ideas for the F.O. column; and/ or (3) the irresistible parallel to his growing (shrinking?) erectile dysfunction [but never mind that as a column topic!]*.

Maybe fill in some background, to mark time while waiting for the

Muse of Feature Columns to get off her ever-lazier butt and down to business? Gerry Frank here, Reader-if-this-gets-written: erstwhile journalist, not quite seventy but getting there fast. Born and raised in a small town near the banks of the Potomac in southern Maryland in World War Two time, where and when the most ubiquitous Us/Them had been Us White Folks as distinct from Them Coloreds, until supplanted after Pearl Harbor by Us Allies versus Them Japs and Nazis (note the difference between that "versus" and the earlier, more ambivalent "as distinct from," a difference to which we may return). Crossed the Chesapeake after high school to Stratford College, on the Free State's Eastern Shore (B.A. English 1957), then shifted north to New Jersey for the next quarter-century to do reportage and editorial work for the *Trenton Times*; also to marry his back-home sweetheart, make babies and help parent them, learn a few life lessons the hard way while doubtless failing to learn some others, and eventually—at age fifty, when those offspring were off to college themselves and learning their own life lessons—to divorce (irreconcilable differences). Had the immeasurably good fortune the very next year, at a Stratford homecoming, to meet alumna Joan Gibson (B.A. English 1967), herself likewise between life chapters just then (forty, divorced, no children, copyediting for her hometown newspaper, the *Wilmington [Delaware] News Journal*). So hit it off together from Day (and Night) One that after just a couple more dates they were spending every weekend together in her town or his, or back in the Stratford to which they shared a fond attachment—and whereto, not long after their marriage in the following year, they moved: Gerry to associate-edit the *Avon County News* and Joan ditto the College's alumni magazine, *The Stratfordian*.

And some fifteen years later here they are, happy with each other and grateful to have been spared not only direct involvement in the nation's several bloody wars during their life-decades, but also such personal catastrophes as loss of children, untimely death of parents or siblings, and devastating accident, disease, or other extraordinary misfortune. Their connection with Gerry's pair of thirty-something children, Joan's elder and younger siblings, and associated spouses and offspring is warm, though geographically attenuated (one couple in Oregon, another in Texas, others in Vermont and Alabama). Husband and wife much enjoy each other's company, their work, their modest TINK prosperity (Two Incomes, No [dependent] Kids), and their leisure activities: hiking, wintertime workouts in the Heron Bay Club's well-equipped fitness center and summertime swimming in it's Olympic-size pool, vacation travel to other countries back in more U.S.-friendly times, and here and there in North America since 9/11 and (in Gerald Frank's Frank Opinion) the Bush administration's Iraq

War fiasco (U.S./"Them"?). Also their, uh ... friends?

Well: No F.O. column yet in any of *that*, that Gerry can see. While typing on from pure professional habit, however, he perpend that paragraph-ending word above, flanked by suspension points before and question mark after: something to circle back to, maybe, after avoiding it for a while longer by reviewing some other senses of that slash dividing Us from Them. Peter Simpson, a fellow they know from Rockfish Reach who teaches at the College and (like Joan Frank) serves on the Heron Bay Estates Community Association, did a good job of that at one of HBECA's recent open meetings, the main agenda item whereof was a proposed hefty assessment for upgrading the development's entrance gates. As most readers of "Frank Opinions" know, we are for better or worse the only gated community in Avon County, perhaps the only one on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Just of the state highway a few miles south of Stratford, Heron Bay Estates is bounded on two irregular sides by branching tidal tributaries of the Matahannock River (Heron and Spartina Creeks, Rockfish and Oyster Coves, Blue Crab Bight, Shad Run), on a third side by a wooded preserve of pines, hemlocks, and sweet gums screening a sturdy chain-link fence, and on it's highway side by a seven-foot-high masonry wall atop an attractively landscaped berm, effectively screening the development from both highway noise and casual view. Midway along this side is our entrance road, Heron Bay Boulevard, accessed via a round-the-clock manned gatehouse with two exit lanes on one side, their gates raised and lowered automatically by electric eye, and two gated entry lanes on the other: one on the left for service vehicles and visitors, who must register with the gatekeeper and display temporary entrance passes on their dashboards, and one on the right for residents and nonresident Club members, whose cars have HBE decals annually affixed to their windshields. So successful has the development been that in the twenty-odd years since it's initial layout it has grown to be the county's second-largest residential entity after the small town of Stratford itself—with the consequence that homeward-bound residents these days not infrequently find themselves backed up four or five cars deep while the busy gatekeepers simultaneously check in visitors in one lane and look for resident decals in the other before pushing the lift-gate button. Taking their cue from the various E-Z Pass devices commonly employed nowadays at bridge and highway toll booths, the developers, Tidewater Communities, Inc., suggested to the Association that an economical alternative to a second gatehouse farther down the highway side (which would require expensive construction, an additional entrance road, and more 24/7 staffing) would be a third entry lane at the present gatehouse, it's gate to be triggered automatically by electronic scansion of a bar-code decal on each

resident vehicle's left rear window.

Most of the Association members and other attendees, Joan and Gerry Frank included, thought this a practical and economical fix to the entrance-backup problem, and when put to the seven members for a vote (one representative from each of HBE's neighborhoods plus one at-large tie-breaker), the motion passed by a margin of six to one. In the pre-vote open discussion, however, objections to it were raised from diametrically opposed viewpoints. On the one hand, Mark Matthews from Spartina Pointe—the recentest member of the Association, whose new weekend-and-vacation home in that high-end neighborhood was probably the grandest residence in all of Heron Bay Estates—declared that in view of HBE's ongoing development (controversial luxury condominiums proposed for the far end of the preserve), what we need is not only that automatic bar-code lane at the Heron Bay Boulevard entrance, but the afore-mentioned second gated entrance at the south end of the highway wall as well, and perhaps a third for service and employee vehicles only, to be routed discreetly through the wooded preserve itself.

In the bluff, down-home manner to which he inclined, even as CEO of a Baltimore investment-counseling firm, "Way it is now," that bald and portly, flush-faced fellow complained, "we get waked up at six A.M. by the groundskeepers and golf course maintenance guys reporting for work with the radios booming in their rusty old Chevys and pickups, *woomf woomf woomf*, y'know? Half of 'em undocumented aliens, quote unquote, but never mind *that* if it keeps the costs down. And then when we-all that live here come back from wherever, the sign inside the entrance says Welcome Home, but our welcome is a six-car backup at the gate, like crossing the Bay Bridge without an E-Z Pass. I say we deserve better'n that."

"Hear hear!" somebody cheered from the back of the Community Association's open-meeting room: Joe Barnes, I think it was, from Rockfish Reach. But my wife, at her end of the members' table up front, objected: "Easy to say if you don't mind a fifty percent assessment hike to build and staff those extra entrances! But I suspect that many of us will feel the pinch to finance just that automatic third entry lane at the gatehouse—which I'm personally all for, but nothing beyond that unless *it* gets backed up."

A number of her fellow members nodded agreement, and one of them added, "As for the racket, we just need to tell the gatekeepers and the maintenance foremen to be stricter about the no-loud-noise rule for service people checking in."

Mark Matthews made a little show of closing his eyes and shaking his head no. The room in general, however, murmured approval.

Which perhaps encouraged Amanda Todd—a friend of Joan's and an Association member from Blue Crab Bight—to surprise us all by saying "Gates and more gates! What do we need *any* of them for, including the ones we've got already?"

Mild consternation in the audience and among her fellow members, turning to relieved amusement when Joan teased, "Because we're a gated community?" But "Really," Ms. Todd persisted, "those TCI ads for Heron Bay are downright embarrassing, with their 'exclusive luxury lifestyles' and such. Even to call this place Heron Bay *Estates* is embarrassing, if you ask me. But then to have to pass through customs every time we come and go, and phone the gatehouse whenever we're expecting a visitor! Plus the secondary nighttime gates at some of our neighborhood entrances, like Oyster Cove, and those push-button driveway gates in Spartina Pointe ... Three gates to pass through, in an area where crime is practically nonexistent!"

"Don't forget the garage door opener," Mark Matthews reminded her sarcastically. "That makes *four* entrances for some of us, even before we unlock the house door. Mindy and I are all for it."

"Hear hear!" his ally called again from the back of the room, where someone else reminded all hands that we weren't *entirely* crime-free: "Remember that Peeping Tom a few years back? Slipped past the main gatehouse and our Oyster Cove night gates too, that we don't use anymore like we did back then, and we never did catch him. But still ..."

"You're proving my point," Amanda argued. Whereupon her husband—the writer George Newett, also from the College—came to her support by quoting the Psalmist: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates! Even lift them up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in!"

"Amen," she said appreciatively. "And *leave* 'em lifted, I say, like those ones at Oyster Cove. No other development around here has gates. Why should we?"

"Because we're *us*," somebody offered, "with a community pool and tennis courts and bike paths that aren't for public use. If you like the other kind, maybe you should move to one of *them*."

Mark Matthews seconded that suggestion with a pleased head-nod. But "All I'm saying," Ms. Todd persisted, less assertively, "—as Robert Frost puts it in one of his poems?—is, quote, 'Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know what I was walling in and walling out, and to whom I'm likely to give offense,' end of quote. Somebody just mentioned *us* and *them*: Who exactly is the *Them* that all these walls and gates are keeping out?"

To lighten things a bit, I volunteered, "That Them is Us, Amanda, waiting at the gate until we get our Heron Bay E-Z Pass gizmo up and running. Shall we put it to a vote?"

"Not quite yet, Gerry," said Peter Simpson—also from the College, as has been mentioned, and chairman of the Association as well as it's member from Rockfish Reach. "Let's be sure that everybody's had his/her say on the matter. Including myself for a minute, if I may?"

Nobody objected. A trim and affable fellow in his fifties, Pete is popular as well as respected both in the Association and on campus, where he's some sort of dean as well as a professor. "I'll try not to lecture," he promised with a smile. "I just want to say that while I understand where both Mark and Amanda are coming from, my own inclination, like Joan's, is to proceed incrementally, starting with the bar-code scanner gate and hoping that'll do the trick, for a few years anyhow." He pushed up his rimless specs. "What's really on my mind, though, now that it's come up, is this Us-slash-Them business. We have to accept that some of us, like Amanda, live here because they like the place *despite* it's being a gated community, while others of us, like Mark, live here in part precisely *because* it's gated, especially if they're not full-time residents. The great majority of us, I'd bet, either don't *mind* the gate thing (except when it gets backed up!) or sort of like the little extra privacy, the way we appreciate our routine security patrols even though we're lucky enough not to live near a high-crime area. It's another Heron Bay amenity, like our landscaping and our golf course. What we need to watch out for (and here comes the lecture I promised I'd spare you) is when that slash between Us and Them moves from being a simple distinction—like Us Rockfish Reach residents and Them Oyster Cove or Spartina Pointers, or Us Marylanders and Them Pennsylvanians and Delawareans—and becomes Us not merely *distinct* from Them, but more or less *superior* to Them, as has all too often been the case historically with whites and blacks, or rich and poor, or for that matter men and women."

Up with the glasses again. Mark Matthews rolled his eyes, but most present seemed interested in Pete's argument. "At it's worst," he went on, "that slash between Us and Them comes to mean Us *versus* Them, as in race riots and revolutions and wars in general. But even here it's worth remembering that *versus* doesn't always necessarily mean inherently superior: It can be like Us versus Them in team sports, or the Yeas versus the Nays in a debating club, or some of the town/gown issues at the College that we try to mediate without claiming that either side is *superior* to the other."

Here he took the glasses off, as if to signal that the sermon was approaching it's close. "I'm sure I'm not alone in saying that some of Debbie's and my closest friends live outside these gates of ours."

"Amen," Joan said on his behalf. After which, and apologizing again for nattering on so, Pete called for a vote authorizing the Association to solicit bids and award a contract for construction of an automatically gated HBE Pass third lane at our development's entrance. When the motion passed, six to one, Amanda Todd good-naturedly reminded Mark Matthews, the lone dissenter, that "Us versus You doesn't mean we don't love you, Mark." To which that broad-beamed but narrow-minded fellow retorted, "You College people, I swear."

"Objection!" Amanda's husband called out.

"Sustained," declared Peter Simpson, rising from his chair and gathering the spec sheets and other papers spread out before him. "No need to pursue it, and thank you all for coming and making your opinions known." Offering his hand to Matthews then, with a smile, "Here's to democracy, Mark, and parliamentary procedure. Agreed?"

"Whatever."

And that had been that, for then. But en route back along sycamore-lined Heron Bay Boulevard to our condominium in "Shad Row," as we like to call it (punning on that seasonal Chesapeake delicacy), we Franks had tsked and sighed at Mark Matthews's overbearing small-mindedness versus Pete Simpson's more generous spirit and eminently reasonable review of the several senses of Us/Them. "Like when people born and raised in Stratford talk about 'us locals' and 'them c'meres,'" Joan said, using the former's term for out-of-towners who "come here" to retire or to enjoy a second home. "Sometimes it's a putdown, sometimes it's just a more or less neutral distinction, depending."

"And even when it's a putdown," her husband agreed, "sometimes it's just a good-humored tease between friends or neighbors—unlike Lady Broad-Ass's Us/Thems in our condo sessions," he added, referring to his Shad Run Condominium Association colleague Rachel Broadus, a hefty and opinionated widow-lady who, two years ago, had vehemently opposed the sale of unit 117 to an openly gay late-middle-aged couple from D.C., early retired from careers in the federal government's General Services Administration—even letting the prospective buyers know by anonymous letter that while it was beyond the Association's authority to forbid the sale, homosexuals were not welcome in Heron Bay Estates. A majority of the Association shared her feelings and had been relieved when the offended couple withdrew their purchase offer, although most agreed with Gerry that the unsigned letter was reprehensible; he alone had spoken on the pair's behalf, or at least had opposed the opposition to them. When in the following year Ms. Broadus had similarly inveighed against the

sale of unit 218 to a dapper Indian-American pharmacist and his wife ("Next thing you know it'll be Mexicans and blacks, and there goes the neighborhood"), he'd had more company in objecting to her objection, and the Raghavans had come to be well liked by nearly all of their neighbors. "Even so," Gerry now reminded his wife, "Broad-Ass couldn't resist saying 'Mind you, Ger, I don't have anything against a nice Jewish couple like you and Joan. But *Hindus?* ' "

Joan groaned at the recollection—who on first hearing from Gerry of this misattribution had said, "You should've showed her your foreskinned shlong already. Oy." Or, they'd agreed, he could have quoted the Irish-American songwriter George M. Cohan's reply to a resort-hotel desk clerk in the 1920s who refused him a room, citing the establishment's ban on Jewish guests: "You thought I was a Jew," said the composer of "The Yankee Doodle Boy," "and I thought you were a gentleman. We were both mistaken." Rachel Broadus, they supposed, had heard of Anne Frank and had readily generalized from that famed Holocaust victim's last name, perhaps pretending even to herself that the Them to which she assigned the Shad Run Franks was not meant pejoratively. It was easy to imagine her declaring that "some of her best friends," et cetera. Gerry himself had used that edged cliché, in quotes—"Some of Our Best Friends ..."—as the heading of a "Frank Opinions" column applauding the progress of Stratford's middle-class African Americans from near invisibility to active representation on the Town Council, the Avon County School Board, and the faculties not only of the local public schools but of the College and the private Fenton Day School as well.

All the above, however, is past history: the HBECA lift-gate meeting and us Franks' return to Shad Run Road for a merlot nightcap on our second-story porch overlooking the moonlit creek (where no shad have been known to run during our residency) before the ten o'clock TV news, bedtime, and another flaccid semi-fuck, Gerry's "Jimmy" less than fully erect and Joan's "Susie" less than wetly welcoming. "Never mind that pair of old farts," Joan had sighed, kissing him goodnight before turning away to sleep: "They're Them; we're still Us." Whoever *that's* getting to be, he'd said to himself—for he really has, since virtual retirement, been ever more preoccupied with his approaching old age and his inevitable, already noticeable decline. To her, however, he wondered merely, "D'you suppose they're trying to tell us something?"

"Whatever it is," she answered sleepily, "don't put it in the column, okay?"

The column: Past history too is his nattering on about all the above to his computer for four work-mornings already, and now a fifth, in search of a "Frank Opinions" piece about all this Us/ Them stuff. By now he has moved on from Joan's "Us Franks" as distinct from "Them body parts of ours," or the singular "I-Gerry/ Thou-'Jimmy,'" to Gerry's-Mind/Gerry's-Body and thence (within the former) to Gerry's-Ego/Gerry's-Id + Superego, and while mulling these several Us/Thems and I/Thous of the concept Mind, he has duly noted that although such distinctions are *made* by our minds, it by no means follows that they're "all in our minds."

Blah blah blah: Won't readers of the *Avon County News* be thrilled to hear it?

Yet another Us/Them now occurs to him (just what he needed!): It's a standing levity in Heron Bay Estates that most of it's male inhabitants happen to be called familiarly by one-syllable first names and their wives by two-: Mark and Mindy Matthews, Joe and Judy Barnes, Pete and Debbie Simpson, Dave and Lisa Bergman, Dick and Susan Felton—the list goes on. But while we Franks, perhaps by reflex, are occasionally fitted to this peculiar template ("Ger" and "Joanie"), we're normally called Gerry and Joan, in exception to the rule: an Us distinct from, though not opposed to, it's Them.

So? So nothing. Has Gerald "Gerry" Frank mentioned his having noticed, years ago, that his normal pulse rate matches almost exactly the tick of seconds on his watch dial, so closely that he can measure less-than-a-minute intervals by his heartbeat? And that therefore, as of his recent sixty-eighth birthday, he had lived for 24,837 days (including 17 leap days) at an average rate of 1,400 pulses per day, or a total of 34,771,800, give or take a few thousand for periods of physical exertion or unusual quiescence? By which same calculation he reckons himself to have been mulling these who-gives-a-shit Us/Thems for some 7,200 heartbeats' worth of days now, approaching beat by beat not only his ultimate demise but, more immediately, Tom Chadwick's deadline, and feeling no closer to a column than he did five days ago.

Maybe a column about that? Lame idea.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick.

He believes he did mention, a few thousand pulses past, that the Shad Run Franks, while on entirely cordial terms with their workmates and with ninety-nine percent of their fellow Heron Bay Estaters, have no *friends*, really, if by friends one means people whom one enjoys having over for drinks and dinner or going out with to a restaurant, not to mention actually vacation-traveling together, as they see some of their neighbors doing. They used to have friends like

that, separately in their pre-Us lives and together in the earliest, pre-Stratford period of their marriage. Over the years since, however, for whatever reasons, their social life has atrophied: annual visits to and from their far-flung family, lunch with a colleague now and then (although they both work mainly at home these days), the occasional office cocktail party or HBE community social—that's about it. They don't particularly *approve* of this state of affairs, mildly wish it were otherwise, but have come to accept, more or less, that outside the workplace that's who they are, or have become: more comfortable with just Us than with Them.

As if his busy fingers have a mind of their own, *To be quite frank, Reader*, he now sees appearing on his computer screen, *old Gerry hasn't been being quite Frank with you about certain things. E.g.:*

— He and his mate share another, very different and entirely secret life, the revelation whereof would scandalize all Stratford and Heron Bay Estates, not to mention their family.

— Or they *don't*, of course, but could sometimes half wish they did, just for the hell of it.

— Or they *don't* so wish or even half wish, for God's sake! Who does this nutcase columnist take us for, that he could even *imagine* either of them so wishing?

— Or he has just learned that the precious, the indispensable Other Half of our Us has been diagnosed with ... oh, advanced, inoperable pancreatic cancer? While *he* sits scared shitless on his butt counting his heartbeats, her killer cells busily metastasize through that dearest of bodies. Maybe a dozen thousand evermore-wretched tick-ticks to go, at most, until The End—of her, therefore of Us, therefore of him.

— Or he's just making all this crap up. Trying it out. Thinking the unthinkable, perhaps in vain hope of it's exorcism, or at least forestallment. But such tomfoolery fools no one. While his right hand types *no one*, his left rummages in a drawer of the adjacent inkjet-printer stand for the reassuring feel of the loaded nine-millimeter automatic pistol that he keeps in there for "self-defense": i.e., for defending Joan and Gerry Frank yet a while longer from murder/suicide—which they agree they'd resort to in any such scenario as that terminal-cancer one above-invoked—by reminding himself that they have the means and the will to do it, if and when the time comes.

But they don't—have the means, at least; at least not by gunfire. There is no pistol, never has been; we Franks aren't the gun-owning sort. Should push come to shove *chez nous*, in our frank opinion we'd go the route that Dick and Susan Felton went last year: double suicide (nobody knows why) by automobile exhaust fumes in the closed

garage of their empty-nest house in Rockfish Reach, with not even a goodbye note to their traumatized, life-disrupted offspring.

Well, we guess we'd leave a note.

Maybe this is it?

Nah. Still ...

Deadline a-coming: Tick. Tick.

Deathline? Tick.

FRANK OPINIONS: Us/Them

or,

Much Ado About

Assisted Living

LIKE ANY NORMAL PERSON, Tim Manning (speaking) used to think and speak of himself as "I," or "me." *Don't ask me*, the old ex-history teacher would start off one of his "His-Stories" by typing on his computer, *who I think is reading or hearing this* —and then on he'd ramble about his and Margie's Oyster Cove community in Heron Bay Estates, and the interesting season when they and their neighborhood were bedeviled (or at least had reason to believe they were) by a Peeping Tom. Stuff like that. *I grabbed the big flashlight from atop the fridge*, he would write, *told Margie to call Security, and stepped out back to check*. Or *"I do sort of miss those days," Margie said to me one evening a few years later ...*

That sort of thing.

But that was Back Then: from the Depression-era 1930s, when Timothy Manning and Margaret Jacobs were born, a few years and Chesapeake counties apart, through their separate childhoods and adolescences in World War Two time, their trial romances and (separate) sexual initiations in late high school and early college years, their fortuitous meeting and impulsive marriage in the American mid-1950s, their modest contributions to the postwar baby boom, and their not unsuccessful careers (he guesses they'd agree) as high school teacher (him), suburban-D.C. realtor (her), and life partners (them!). Followed, in their sixties and the century's eighties, by their phased retirement to Heron Bay Estates: at first Bay-Bridge-hopping between their city house near Washington and their new weekend/vacation duplex in Heron Bay's Oyster Cove neighborhood, then swapping the former for a more maintenance-free condominium halfway between D.C. and Annapolis (where Margie's real-estate savvy found them a rare bargain in that busy market), and ultimately — when wife joined husband in full retirement—selling that condo at a healthy profit, unloading as best they could whatever of it's furnishings the new owners had no interest in buying, and settling contentedly into their modest villa at 1010 Oyster Cove Court for the remainder of their active life together.

Amounting, as it turned out, to a mere dozen-plus years, which feels to Tim Manning as he types these words like about that many months at most. Where did the years go? He can scarcely remember—as has been becoming the case with more and more things every year. Where'd he put the car keys? Or for that matter their old station wagon itself, parked somewhere in the Stratford shopping plaza that he still manages to drive to now and then for miscellaneous

provisions? As of this sentence he hasn't yet reached that classic early-Alzheimer's symptom of forgetting which keys are for what, or which car out there is their Good Gray Ghost (excuse him: *his* GGG, damn it, now that Indispensable Margie—his "better two-thirds," he used to call her—is no more), but he sure forgets plenty of other things these days.

E.g., exactly what "Tim Manning" was about to say before this particular His-Story wandered. Something having to do with how—beginning with the couple's reluctant Final Move three years ago from dear "old" Oyster Cove to Bayview Manor and especially since Margie's unassimilable death just one year later—he has found himself standing ever more outside himself: prodding, directing, *assisting* Tim Manning through the increasingly mechanical routines of his daily existence. Talk about Assisted "Living" ...

And who, exactly, is the Assistant? Not "I" these days, he was saying, but old T.M.: same guy who'll get on with telling this story if he can recollect what the hell it is.

Well, for starters: In a way, he supposes, "T.M." is replacing (as best he can't) irreplaceable Margie as Tim Manning's living-assistant. In the forty-nine and eleven-twelfths years of their married life, she and he constantly assisted each other with everything from changing their babies' diapers to changing jobs, habitations, outworn habits, and ill-considered opinions as their time went by. In more recent years, as her body and his mind faltered, he more and more assisted her with physical matters—her late-onset diabetes, near-crippling arthritis and various other -itises, their attendant medicos and medications—and ever more depended on *her* assistance in the memory and attention departments as his Senior Moments increased in frequency and duration. While at the same time, of course, they continued to assist each other in the making of life decisions.

Such as ...

Ahem: *Such as?*

Sorry there: got sidetracked, he guesses, from some sidetrack or other. *Such as*, he sees he was saying, their no-longer-avoidable joint recognition—after some years of due denial, so unappealing were the alternatives—that what with Margie now all but wheelchaired and her husband sometimes unable to locate the various lists that he'd come to depend on to remember practically everything, even the housekeeping of their Oyster Cove duplex was becoming more than they could manage. Time to check out Assisted (ugh!) Living.

Not long after the turn of the new millennium, they apprised their two grown children of that reluctant intention, and both the Son in St.

Louis and the Daughter in Detroit (that alliteration, their father was fond of saying, helped him remember which lived where) dutifully offered to scout suitable such operations in their respective cities. But while the elder Mannings quite enjoyed their occasional visits to Bachelor-girl Barbara and Married-but-childless Michael, they felt at home only in tidewater country, where they still had friends and former workmates. Dislocation enough to exchange house and yard, longtime good neighbors, and the amenities of Heron Bay Estates for a small apartment, communal meals, and a less independent life, most probably across the Matahannock Bridge, in another county. Although they went through the motions of collecting brochures up and down the peninsula from several "continuing care retirement communities" whose advertisements they'd noted in the weekly *Avon County News* ("Quality retirement lifestyles! Gourmet dining! On-site medical center! A strong sense of caring and community!"), and even took a couple of Residency-Counselor-Guided Personal Tours, they agreed from the outset that their likeliest choice would be Bayview Manor. Situated no farther from the town of Stratford on the river's east side than was Heron Bay Estates on it's west, Bayview was a project of the same busy developer, Tidewater Communities, Inc. It was generally regarded as being at least the peer of any similar institution on the Shore, and among it's residents were a number of other ex-HBE dwellers no longer able or inclined to maintain their former "lifestyles" in Shad Run or Oyster Cove, much less in the development's upper-scale detached-house neighborhoods. Depending upon availability—and one's inclinations and financial resources—one could apply for a one- or two-bedroom cottage there (with or without den) or choose from several levels of one- and two-bedroom apartments, all with a variety of meal plans. Standard amenities included an indoor pool, a fitness center, crafts and other activities rooms, a beauty salon, gift shop, and branch bank office, and periodic shuttle service to and from Stratford; also available were such extra-cost options as linen and personal laundry service, weekly or biweekly housekeeping, a "professionally staffed" Medical Center, and chauffeured personal transportation. For a couple like the Mannings who didn't yet require *fully* assisted living, the then-current "base price entry fees" ranged from \$100,000 for a small one-bedroom apartment (refundable minus two percent for each month of occupancy) to just under \$500,000 for a high-end two-bedroom cottage with den (ninety percent refundable after reoccupancy of unit by new resident when current occupants shift to Med Center residence or to grave). Housekeeping and other service fees ranged from \$2,000 to \$4,000 monthly, and meal plans from individual dining room meal charges for those who preferred to continue preparing most of their own meals at home to about \$800

monthly for a couple's thrice-daily feed in the dining hall.

"Jesus," Tim wondered. "Can we even consider it?"

They could, his wife (the family investment manager) assured him. But what about the fact that Bayview, no less than the other places they'd checked out, got it's share of bad reviews as well as good? On the one hand were those happy Golden Agers in the brochure photos, duly apportioned by gender and ethnicity and handsomely decked out in "country club casual" attire while bird-watching or flower-arranging, painting and quilting and pottery-making, or smiling at one another across bridge and dining tables. On the other, such Internet chatroom grumbles both from some residents and from their relatives as *The food sucks, actually, if you've been used to eating real food*, and *Be warned: It's college dorm life all over again—at age eighty!*, and *Frankly, it's the effing pits*. The best Margie and Tim could guess was that temperamentally upbeat, outgoing, people-enjoying types were likely to find their continuing-care situation at least as much to their liking as what had immediately preceded it in their *curriculum vitae*, while the more easily dissatisfied were, well, dissatisfied. They themselves, they supposed, fell somewhere between those poles.

"May we not fall on our geriatric asses between them," they more or less prayed; then gave each other a determinedly cheerful high-five over white wine and champignon cheese at Happy Hour on their screened porch overlooking Oyster Cove, and took the plunge: what they'd come to call the Old Farts' B.M. Move. Given the ever-rising value of Heron Bay real estate, Margie figured they could list for \$400K the free-and-clear villa for which they'd paid slightly more than half that amount fifteen years ago, take out a \$300K mortgage on it to finance either a midrange Bayview cottage or one of those high-end apartments, pay of the mortgage shortly thereafter when good old 1010 Oyster Cove Court sells for, say, \$375K, and shift across the river with most of their present furnishings at a tidy profit—the more since ex-realtor Margie would be handling the sale and saving them the seven percent agent's commission.

Thus the plan, and thus it came to pass—even a bit better than their projection, but at their age a wrench and hassle all the same. In a mere five months, the villa found a buyer for \$380K, and between it's sale and closing dates a high-end Bayview apartment became available, it's widowed and emphysemic tenant obliged to move into the Manor's Medical Center. While they'd thought that "transitioning" to one of the cottages might be less of a jolt, they took the apartment, reminding themselves that they had, after all, rather enjoyed that interim condominium over near Annapolis, and that as they grew older and less able than presently, the apartment would be more convenient—to that same Medical Center, among other things. So

okay, they would miss gardening, outdoor barbecuing, and the relative privacy of a house. But what the hell, they had adjusted readily enough back in the '80s from detached house to duplex living; they could hack it in a comfortable apartment.

So hack it they did: quite admirably all in all, given Margie's physical limitations. As their nation enmired itself in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Mannings bade goodbye to their Oyster Cove neighbors and other Heron Bay friends (who were, after all, a mere thirty-minute drive from Bayview), scaled down from two cars in a garage to just Old Faithful in a designated parking-lot space, and packed and unpacked their stuff for what must surely be the last time. Over the next year-and-a-bit—from late summer 2003 to mid-autumn '04—they repositioned their furniture and knickknacks, rehung their wall art, reshelfed as many of their books as they had room for, donated the rest to the Avon County Library, and gamely set about making new acquaintances, sampling the Manor's sundry activities, and accustoming themselves to their start-out meal plan: breakfasts and lunches together in the apartment, dinners in the dining hall except now and then in a Stratford restaurant. Pretty lucky they were, T.M. supposes in retrospect, to have made their "B.M. Move" when they did, before the nationwide housing-market slump just a few years later, not to mention before the recent, all-but-total destruction of Heron Bay Estates by that spinoff tornado from Tropical Storm Giorgio in an otherwise eventless hurricane season. And most certainly not to mention ... the Unmentionable, which however is this His-Story's defining event and therefore *must* be mentioned, to say the least, not far hence.

And a pretty good job they did, all in all (he believes he was saying), of making the best of their new life. Okay, so they shook their heads occasionally at the relentless professional cheeriness of some of the Bayview staff; and they had no taste for the bridge tournaments, square-dance and bingo nights, and some other items on the Activities menu; and the dining hall fare, while it had it's fans, was in their opinion mostly blah. But on the plus side were some of the Manor's sightseeing excursions to places like the du Pont estate's Winterthur Garden, up near Wilmington, and the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum down in St. Michaels (the Mannings had got out of the habit of such touring), the Happy Hour and dinnertime socializing in the Blue Heron Lounge and dining hall, which one could do as much or little of as one chose (sipping from one's personal wine supply at the bar), and the comforting-indeed knowledge that, if needed, assistance was as near at hand as the Help Alarm button conveniently located in

every residence unit. They were doing all right, they assured their children and their Heron Bay Estates friends; they were doing all right

...

Until, on a certain chill-but-sunny midmorning in November 2004, as suddenly and without warning as that above-mentioned fluke tornado two years later, out of nowhere came the End of Everything. After a late breakfast of orange juice, English muffins, and coffee (they'd been up past their usual bedtime the night before, watching with unsurprised dismay the presidential election returns on TV), Tim had withdrawn to his computer desk in the apartment's guest-bedroom/study to exchange disappointed e-mails with Son and Daughter, who shared their parents' stockliberal persuasion. Margie, still in her nightclothes, lingered at table over a second coffee to read the *Baltimore Sun's* painful details of John Kerry's unsuccessful bid to thwart George W. Bush's reelection—a disaster for the nation, in the Mannings' opinion—after which she meant to move as usual to *her* computer in their little den/office/library to do likewise and attend to some family business before lunch and whatever. But he had no sooner sat down and booted up than he heard a crash out there and, bolting kitchenward, found his without-whom-nothing life partner, his bride of half a century minus one month, his Margie!Margie!Margie! face-down and motionless on the breakfast-nook floor tiles, coffee from the shattered porcelain mug staining her nightgown and the crumpled pages of the *Sun*. With a half-strangled cry he ran to his fallen mate, her eyes open but not moving, her face frozen with alarm. Some years previously, the Mannings had signed up at the Heron Bay Estates Community Activities Center for a half-day course in Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation and Warning Signs of Stroke and Cardiac Arrest, and had vowed to review the various drills together at least annually thereafter—but never got around to doing so. Now he desperately felt for a pulse, put his face near hers to check for respiration, and detected neither; dashed to locate and press that Help button (on the wall beside the main-bath toilet); dashed back to try whether he could recollect anything whatever of the CPR routine; pressed his mouth to Margie's in what was meant to be some sort of forced inhalation but dissolved into a groaning kiss and then collapsed into a sobbing, helpless last embrace.

Helpless, yes: He still damns Tim Manning for that. Not that anything he or anyone else might have done would likely have saved her, but had their situations been reversed—had the thitherto undetected and now fatally ruptured aneurysm (as the Cause of Death turned out to be: not, after all, the news of Bush and Cheney's reelection) been his

instead of hers—Margie Manning, for all her alarm and grief, would no doubt have taken some charge of things. She'd have dialed 911, he bets, and/or the establishment's Medical Center; would have shouted down the hallway for help and pounded on their neighbors' doors—all the usual desperate things that desperate people in such situations typically do, even if in vain. And would then have somehow collected herself enough to deal as needed with Med Center and other Bayview functionaries; to notify children and friends, comfort and be comforted by them, handle the obligatory farewell visits, and manage the disposition of the Departed's remains and estate and the rearrangement of the Survivor's life. But except back in his high school history-teaching classroom before his retirement and in a few other areas (tending their former lawn and shrubbery, making handyman repairs, presiding over their Oyster Cove cookouts), Margie was ever the more capable Manning—especially in emotionally charged situations, which tended to rattle and de-capacitate her husband. Now (i.e., then, on Election Day + 1, 2004) he lay literally floored, clutching his unbelievably dead mate's body as if he too had been stroke-stricken, which he desperately wished he *had* been. Unable to bring himself even to respond to the Manor's alarm-bell First Responder (from the nurses' station over in Assisted Living) when she presently came knocking, calling, doorbell-ringing, and doorknob-twisting, he lay closed-eyed and mute while the woman fetched out her passkey, turned the deadbolt, and pressed in with first-aid kit and urgent questions.

Don't ask T.M. how things went from there. Death is, after all, a not-unusual event in elder-care establishments, whose staff will likely be more familiar with His visitations than will the visited. As it happens, neither Tim nor for that matter Margie had had any prior Death Management experience: Their respective parents' last days, funeral arrangements, and estate disposition had been handled by older siblings, whose own life closures were then overseen by competent grown offspring who lived nearby and shared their parents' lives. The Bayview responder—an able young black woman named Gloria, as Tim sort of remembers—knelt to examine the pair of them, spoke to him in a raised voice, cell-phoned or walkie-talkied for assistance, spoke to him some more, asking questions that perhaps he answered or at least endeavored to, and maybe did a few nurse-type things on the spot. After a while he was off the floor: in a chair, perhaps mumbling apologies for his helplessness while Margie's body was gurneyed over to the Med Center to await further disposition. Although unable to take action, not to mention taking charge, he eventually became able at least to reply to questions. *To be notified?* Son in St. Louis, Daughter in Detroit. *Funeral arrangements?* None,

thankee. *None?* None: Both Mannings preferred surcease *sans* fuss: no funeral, no grave or other marker, no memorial service. *You sure of that?* Sure: Organs to be harvested for recycling if usable and convenient; otherwise forget it. Remaining remains to be cremated—and no urn of ashes or ritual scattering, *s.v.p.*; just ditch the stuff. All her clothes and other personal effects to the nearest charity willing to come get them. Oh: and if Nurse happened to have in her kit a shot of something to take him out too, they could do a two-for-one right then and there and spare all hands more bother down the road.

Because what the fuck (as he explained to S-in-S and D-in-D when both were "B-in-B": Billeted, for the nonce, in Bayview): He and Margie had been fortunate in their connection and had relished their decades together. Unlike their Oyster Cove neighbor Ethel Bailey, for example, with her metastasized cervical cancer, Margie had been spared a lingering, painful death; she'd gone out in one fell swoop, a sort of Democrat parallel to their other O.C. neighbor Jim Smythe's fatal stroke in '92 upon hearing of Bill Clinton's defeat of George Bush *père*. Better yet—so he can see from his present perspective—would've been for the two of them to go out together like George and Carol Walsh over in Rockfish Reach last year, when T.S. Giorgio's freak tornado flattened most of Heron Bay Estates. On second thought, though, that must have been scary as shit: Best of all (if they'd only known that that goddamn aneurysm was about to pop) would've been to take matters into their own hands like those other Rockfish Reachers Dick and Susan Felton, who for no known reason drove home one fine September night from a neighborhood party, closed their automatic garage door, left their car's engine idling and it's windows down, and snuffed themselves. Way to go, guys! Yeah: Pour Margie a glass of her pet pinot grigio and himself a good ripe cabernet, crank up the Good Gray Ghost, hold hands, breathe deep, and sip away till the last drop or last breath, whichever.

Whoops, forgot: no garage these days over here in Geezerville. Nor much get-it-done-with gumption either, for that matter, in this lately overspacious apartment, where T.M. pecks away at his word processor *faute de* fucking *mieux* (but No thankee, Barb and Mike: Dad'd rather stay put than change geographies this late in the day). Left to himself, Yours Truly Tim Manning is ... well ... *left to himself*, making this minimal most of his hapless self-helplessness by chewing on language like a cow it's cud.

Assisted Living? Been there, done that.

So?

Well. Somewhere on this here QWERTYUIOP keyboard—maybe up among all those *F1–F12*, *pg up/pg dn*, *num lock/clear* buttons?—there

ought to be one for Assisted Dying ...

Like, hey, one of these, maybe: *<home? end>?*

help

Worth a try:

enter

The End

WE DELMARVANS ... Delmarva Peninsulars? Anyhow, we dwellers on this flat, sand-crab-shaped projection between the Atlantic Ocean and Chesapeake Bay, comprising the state of Delaware and the Eastern Shores of both Maryland and Virginia, are no strangers to major storms. Even before global warming ratcheted up our Atlantic hurricane season—pounding the Caribbean, the Gulf of Mexico, and the East Coast of the USA from July into November with ever more numerous and destructive tropical tempests—there had been slam-bangers every decade or so for as long as anybody can remember. The nameless Big One of 1933, for example, cut a whole navigable inlet through our peninsula's coastal barrier islands, decisively separating the resort town of Ocean City, on Fenwick Island, from undeveloped Assateague Island, below it. Hurricane Hazel in 1954 roared over the Outer Banks of North Carolina into Chesapeake Bay, sent crab boats through second-story windows in our marshy lower counties, and sank the five-masted tourist schooner *Levin J. Marvel* in mid-Bay, with considerable loss of life. Even in George and Carol Walsh's dozen and a half years in Heron Bay Estates, at least three formidable ones have "impacted" that gated community and environs: Hugo in '89, which downed trees and power lines hereabouts after ravaging the Carolinas; Floyd in '99, with its humongous basement-flooding downpours; and Isabel in 2003—a mere tropical storm packing less wind and rain than those hurricanes, but piling a record-breaking eight-foot storm surge into the upper Bay that tore up countless waterfronts and flooded historic riverside houses in nearby Stratford that had been dry, if never high, since the eighteenth century. Nothing so catastrophic hereabouts to date as the great Galveston hurricane of 1900 or Katrina's wipe-out of New Orleans in 2005, but we tidewater Marylanders keep a weather eye out and storm-prep list handy from Independence Day to Halloween.

That earlier holiday, with its traditional patriotic fireworks display upriver in Stratford and Heron Bay's own smaller one of our Blue Crab Marina Club pier (rebuilt after T.S. Isabel), was just a few weeks behind us when Tropical Storm Antonio fan-fared this year's season by fizzling out north of Puerto Rico after sideswiping the Leeward Islands with minimal damage. On Antonio's Latino heels a fortnight later came his *gringuita* sister Becky, who during her transatlantic passage rapidly graduated from Tropical Depression to Named Tropical Storm (sustained winds between 50 and 73 miles per hour on the Saffir-Simpson scale) to Category 1 Hurricane (74–95 mph) before turning

north-northwest in midocean, passing harmlessly east of Bermuda as if en route to Nova Scotia, but dissipating long before she got there. To all hands' surprise then—not least the National Hurricane Center's, which had predicted another busier-than-average season—there followed the opposite, an extraordinarily stormless summer: fewer-than-normal ordinary thundershowers, even, along our mid-Atlantic Coast, and a series of tropical depressions only a handful of which achieved named-storm status, much less hurricanehood. In vain through August and September the severe-weather aficionados (of whom the afore-mentioned George Walsh was one) daily checked Weather.com for signs of the promised action. The autumnal equinox passed without a single hurricane's whacking Florida and points north or west—a far cry indeed from '05's record-breaking season, which in addition to wrecking the Gulf Coast had exhausted that year's alphabet of storm names and obliged the weather service to rebegin in October with the Greek alphabet. This year Columbus Day came and went, Halloween approached, and we were no farther down the list than Tropical Storm (T.S.) Elliott, with the inevitable lame jokes about its name's proximity to that of the author of *The Waste Land*.

But then—*ta-da!*—after Elliott fizzled in the Windward Islands and then Frederika, right behind him, petered out of the Leewards, there materialized in midocean the tempest that might have been dubbed George if that name hadn't been used already, but since it had been (1998), was dubbed Giorgio instead, in keeping with the Weather Service's storm-naming policies of ethnic diversity and gender alternation. And now, perhaps, this nonstory called "The End" can begin.

"*Giorgio?*" I imagine George Walsh wondering aloud to his wife, who's at her computer, as is he his, in the adjoining workrooms of their ample Georgian-style house on Shoreside Drive, in Rock-fish Reach. "Is that me in Spanish?"

"In Spanish you'd be J-o-r-g-e," I hear Carol call back through the open door between His and Hers—in which latter she's checking out the websites of various resort accommodations on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, where they hope to vacation next February: "Pronounced *Hor-hay*. Giorgio's Italian. Wherefore ask ye, prithee?"

She talks that way sometimes. Her husband then explains what he's just seen on Weather.com: that a tropical depression near the Cape Verde Islands off West Africa, which he's been monitoring for the past several days, has organized and strengthened into the seventh named storm of the season as it crossed toward the Antilles, and is

currently forecast to escalate in the Caribbean from Tropical Storm Giorgio to a Category 1 hurricane.

"O joy," Mrs. W. would likely respond, her tone the auditory equivalent of a patient eye-roll, and go back to her Internet chatroom on the pros and cons of those vacation lodgings, as does Mr. to his storm-tracking.

So meet the Walshes, Reader, as I reconstruct them—who, despite prevailingly robust health in their seventh decade of a successful life and fourth of a good marriage, have only eight remaining days of both until The End. Longtime Stratfordians before they shifted the five miles south to Heron Bay Estates, like the majority of their neighbors they're more or less retired at the time of this "story." Carol, sixty-five, is the ex-vice principal of Avon County High School, where for years she'd been a much-loved teacher of what the curriculum called Literature & Language and she called Reading & Writing. Outgoing and athletic (though less trim and more fatigue-prone nowadays, I'd bet, than she's used to being), she still enjoys tennis, swimming, and bicycling, and "to keep her hand in" coaches a number of college-bound ACHS seniors for their SATs as well as presiding over weekly meetings of the Heron Bay Book Club. Her husband, sixty-eight, was born and raised in Stratford, where his father directed a local bank. After graduation from the county high school at which his future wife would later teach and administrate, he crossed the Bay to take a baccalaureate in business at the University of Maryland, where Carol (from the Alleghenies of western Maryland) happened to be working toward her degree in education. By happy chance among so many thousands of College Park undergraduates, in her freshman and his senior year they met, introduced by a fraternity brother of George's who happened to be an old high school friend of Carol's and who, shortly after her graduation three years later, would be best man at their wedding. The bridegroom being by then busily employed at Stratford Savings & Loan, the newlyweds set up housekeeping in his hometown. While George—on his own merits, be it said—rose rapidly in the ranks of his father's firm, Carol completed at Stratford College the requisite postgrad credits for teacher certification. The two then thrived in their chosen fields, moving through the decades to high, though never top, positions in each (George would no doubt have succeeded his father as president of SS&L had he remained there rather than shifting in the early 1980s to a promising position with the Eastern Shore wing of Tidewater Communities, Inc., just breaking ground for it's Heron Bay Estates project). Although less extroverted and community-spirited than Carol, he got along easily with colleagues and business associates, and in his retirement still enjoys attending Rotary Club and TCI board meetings. Husband and wife

agree that like their differing genders, their differing temperaments, interests, and even metabolisms enhance rather than detract from their connection (despite his hearty appetite, George's body has shrunk with age, and his posture is becoming bent already, as was his father's). Their one child—a sometimes difficult but much-loved daughter with her mother's smile and her father's frown—went off to college in Ohio and never returned to Tidewaterland except to visit her parents. Now forty, lesbian, childless, and currently companionless as well, Ellen Walsh works in the editorial offices of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* to support herself while pursuing, thus far without success, what she believes or anyhow hopes is her true vocation, the writing of serious literary fiction. Her parents content themselves with their hobbies and household routines: the pleasures and activities above-mentioned plus some gardening and small-scale renovation projects. Also, of course, household chores, errands, and dealings with maintenance-and-service people—yard crew, housecleaner, roofer and plumber and painter and electrician—all more frequent as their house gets older by HBE standards. To which must be added visits to the sundry doctors, dentists, and pharmacists who tend to their similarly aging bodies.

In all, a comfortable, fortune-favored life, as they well appreciate: ample pensions, annuity income, and a solid, conservative investment portfolio; not-bad health; no family tragedies; few really close friends (and no house pets), but no enemies. To be sure, they fear the prospect of old age and infirmity; can't help envying neighbors with married children and grandkids near at hand to share lives with and eventually "look after" them. Over their seven decades, separately and together, they've done this and that if not *this* or *that*; traveled here and there though not there and there; succeeded at A, B, and C if not at D, E, and F. No extraordinary good luck beyond their finding each other and being thus far spared extraordinary bad luck. Could wish for some things they never had, but feel graced indeed with each other, with their family (siblings and nieces and nephews in addition to their daughter), their neighbors and neighborhood, and the worthy if unremarkable accomplishments of their past and present life. They wish it could go on for a long while more! And have, after all, no reason to expect that it won't, for at least another decade or so.

But it won't.

"Yup," George reports next morning, or maybe the morning after that. "We've got ourselves a Cat. One hurricane. Looks like old Giorgio's going to pass under Puerto Rico and smack southern Haiti."

His wife sighs, shakes her head, adjusts her reading glasses. "Just what that poor miserable country needs."

I see them at breakfast in their nightclothes, George scanning the *Sun's* weather page while Carol reads with sympathetic indignation an op-ed criticism of the Bush administration's ill-funded public-education program called No Child Left Behind: all show and no substance, in her and the columnist's opinion. The news from Iraq, as usual, is all bad: Husband and wife agree that their government's preemptive invasion of that country was unnecessary, poorly planned, and disastrous, but neither has a firm opinion on what's to be done about the resulting debacle. Things aren't going well in Afghanistan either, and the news from sub-Saharan Africa remains appalling. After breakfast, stretching exercises, and an hour or so at their desks, Carol will change into warmup clothes for her tennis date at the Club while George attends to some errands in town. They'll kiss goodbye as usual, remeet for lunch—perhaps out on their pleasant screened porch, the day being sunny and unseasonably warm for late October—and plan their afternoon: a bit of autumn yard cleanup, maybe, before next month's major leaf-fall from the neighborhood's maples, oaks, and sycamores; some cricket spray around the house foundation before the first frosts bring the critters indoors. Then perhaps a bicycle ride on Heron Bay's bike and jogging paths, if they're not too tired, before cocktails and hors d'oeuvres on the patio, a shower, dinner prep (still good weather for barbecuing), and after dinner their customary hour or so of reading and/or Internet stuff, a nightcap hour of television, and to bed after the ten o'clock news and a check of the Weather Channel.

So?

So nothing, really. In a proper Story, one would by now have some sense of a Situation: some latent or overt conflict, or at least some tension, whether between the Walshes themselves or between them on the one hand and something exterior to them on the other (a neighbor, a relative, a life problem, whatever); then some turn of events to raise the dramatical stakes. In short, a story-in-progress, the action of which is felt to be building strategically to some climax and satisfying denouement. The narrative thus far of this late-middle-aged, upper-middle-class, early-twenty-first-century, contented exurban North American married couple, however, it's teller readily acknowledges to be no proper Story, only a chronicle: It's Beginning now ended, it's Middle has begun, and it's End draws nearer, sentence by sentence, as Hurricane Giorgio, after hitting Haiti with 90-mile-per-hour winds, turns northwest, crosses eastern and central Cuba (diminishing inland to Tropical Storm force and then restrengthening to Category 1 in the warm Florida Straits), veers north-northwest, and

at a leisurely forward speed of 8 mph approaches landfall between the Keys and Miami. But an End is not the same as an Ending.

Just wanted to get that clear. Over the several days following, while Carol and George carry on with their drama-free lives, Tropical-Storm-again Giorgio drenches southeast Florida, turns north-northeast into the Atlantic below Cape Canaveral, and re-regains hurricane force before his next landfall, between Capes Fear and Lookout in North Carolina's Outer Banks; he then weakens yet again from Cat. 1 to Borderline T.S. as he makes his way toward Norfolk and the mouth of the Chesapeake, leaving the usual trail of flash floods and power outages. Closely following his progress, the Walshes and their fellow Delmarvans hope he'll turn out to sea or at worst pass just offshore; instead, at bicycle speed he moseys straight up our peninsula, his sustained winds diminishing to 35–40 mph with occasional higher gusts, before his disorganized remnants pass up into Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Much (welcome) rain to relieve a droughty autumn, and overall not a lot of damage: some roads temporarily flooded; relatively few trees and power lines down, the ground having been abnormally dry; the routine handful of casualties (macho teenager drowned in flash flood while trying to cross rushing stream; elderly couple killed in collision with skidding SUV on I-95 between Baltimore and Wilmington); some messed-up basements and damaged boats at docks and marina slips, but nothing like '03's shoreline-wrecking Isabel.

Except that, as happens on rare occasions, the system spun of a single, short-lived but *very* strong tornado, watches for which had been posted for much of Maryland's Eastern Shore but generally ignored beyond the typical storm-prep stuff, our Tidewaterland being non-twister-prone. Subsequently rated a high-end F3 on the Fujita scale (winds just above 200 mph), the thing touched down here in Avon County a few miles south of Stratford, fortunately sparing that colonial-era college town but bull's-eyeing instead, not one of those mobile-home parks that such tempests seem to favor, but handsome Heron Bay Estates.

I.e., us. Established by TCI during the Reagan administration as the area's first gated community. Successfully developed through the George Bush Senior and Bill Clinton years from blueprints and promotional advertisements to built-out neighborhoods of detached and semidetached houses and low- and mid-rise condos, all generously landscaped and tastefully separated from one another by tidal creeks and wetland ponds, winding roads, golf-course fairways, and small parkland areas. Amenitied with grounds- and gatekeepers, security patrols, clubhouses, tennis courts, marina facilities, pool and fitness center and activities building, community and neighborhood associations, website, and monthly calendar-magazine; also with

sightseeing excursions to D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, and various Atlantic beach resorts; interest groups ranging from contract bridge, book discussion, gardening, and investment-strategy clubs to political, religious, and community-service organizations; Internet and foreign-language classes; neighborhood picnics, progressive dinners, and holiday parties. Populated by close to a thousand mostly white Protestant, mostly late-middle-aged, mostly middle- and upper-middle-class families, nearly all empty-nesters, many retired or semiretired, a considerable percentage with other homes elsewhere, plus a few quite wealthy individuals and a sprinkling of Catholics, Jews, Asians, and other minorities—even a half-dozen school-age children. Our lack of such urban attractions as museums, concert halls, nightclubs, and extensive restaurant and shopping facilities largely offset both by our reasonable proximity to those aforementioned cities and by nearby Stratford College, with its public lecture and concert series, continuing-education programs, and varsity sports events. In sum, a well-conceived and admirably executed project—nay, *community*—developed to completion over two dozen years and then, in half that many minutes, all but obliterated.

Not for the first time in these pages, "So?" one might reasonably inquire: on the scale of natural catastrophes, a trifle compared to Hurricane Katrina or the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami, with its death toll of some 230,000. Indeed, although Heron Bay Estates was effectively wrecked, the human casualties of that spinoff tornado were remarkably low: only two deaths (one fewer than the earlier-mentioned toll of Giorgio's unhurried movement up the peninsula) plus numerous bone fractures and assorted lacerations, sprains, and contusions from flying debris, several of which injuries required emergency room treatment.

Indeed, that so many dwelling places and other structures could be destroyed with so comparatively few people seriously hurt, not to mention killed, would seem as fluky a circumstance as the twister itself—the more so since, unlike hurricane warnings, tornado watches hereabouts don't prompt evacuation. Granted, it was the forenoon of a late-October weekday: Those half-dozen youngsters were in school, their working parents and other office-going adults at their jobs in Stratford or elsewhere, and others yet doing various errands beyond our gates. Many of the snowbirds had migrated already to their winter quarters in more southern climes; numerous of those for whom Heron Bay was a weekend/vacation retreat were at their primary residences in the Washington-to-Philadelphia corridor, and some of our year-round resident retirees were off traveling. Even so, not a few HBEers were at home in their Egret's Crest or Shad Run condos, their Oyster Cove villas or Blue Crab Bight coach homes, their detached houses in

Rockfish Reach or Spartina Pointe—at work in home offices, fiddling with their computers, or doing routine chores—while some others were enjoying bridge games at the Club, workouts at the fitness center, etc. And our staff, of course, were about their regular employment at the entrance gates, the golf course and grounds maintenance depots, the Community Association office, and the Heron Bay and Blue Crab Marina clubhouses. Bit of a miracle, really, that so many survived such devastation so little scathed—collapsed buildings ablaze from leaking propane lines or flooded by ruptured water pipes (in some cases, both at once)—and that only a couple were killed.

"A couple" in both senses: M/M George and Carol Walsh, of what used to be 1110 Shoreside Drive in what used to be the Rockfish Reach neighborhood of what once was Heron Bay Estates, in what manages to go on being Avon County, upper Eastern Shore of Maryland, USA 21600. Crushed and buried, they were, in the rubble of that not-unhandsome residence: two red-brick-sided, white-trimmed, black-shuttered-and-doored, slate-roofed stories, of which only the far end of one chimneyed exterior wall remained standing after the tornado had roared through the community into Heron Bay proper, where it waterspouted and then quickly dissipated in the adjoining Matahannock River. Their bodies (his more or less atop hers) not excavated therefrom until quite a few days later, when stunned survivors managed to tally the injured, review the roster of those known or thought to have been in residence, note the unaccounted-for, and attempt to contact next of kin while salvaging what they could of their own possessions, assessing their losses, and scrambling to make at-least-temporary new living arrangements for themselves. A traumatic business, especially for the elderly among us and most particularly for those without a second home or nearby relatives to take them in. No makeshift Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers for us Heron Bay Estaters, thanks!

"So?" you not unreasonably persist: Why should you care, other than abstractly, as one tsks at the morning newspaper's daily report of disasters large and small around the globe? And while you're at it, who's this "I," you might ask, the presumptive teller of this so-called tale, who speaks of "we" Delmarvans and "our" HBE? Am I perhaps, for example, Dean Peter Simpson of Stratford College, a Rockfish Reacher like the Walshes and, with my Ms., one of the hosts of that neighborhood's annual progressive-dinner parties, as were George and Carol? Or maybe I'm another George: that self-styled Failed-Old-Fart Fictionist George Newett, also from the College once upon a time and, with *my* Ms., erstwhile resident of what used to be HBE's Blue Crab Bight? George Newett, sure, why not, who ... let's see ... let's say ... once upon a dozen-years-ago time permitted himself, to his own

surprise and likely hers as well, a one-shot adulterous liaison with ... guess who: Carol Walsh! In her early fifties she was back then, his fellow Heron Bay Estates Community Association member and, shall we say, ardent community servicer? Never mind the details. Or wait: Maybe I'm that Miz of his, the poet Amanda Todd, who (you know how it is with us poets) upon her husband's shamefacedly confessing his uncharacteristic lapse, sought poetic justice, shall we say, by bedding George Walsh in turn—or would have so done, except that that astonished and out-of-practice chap couldn't get it up even to the point of consenting to let her try getting it up for him?

Good tries yourself there, Comrade Reader—to which you might add the possibility that I'm *Ellen Walsh*, George and Carol's errant, Sapphic daughter! Ellen Walsh, sure: Early wire-service reports of that freak Delmarva tornado reach my office at the *Plain Dealer*, followed by more specific accounts of a certain gated community's near-total destruction. I repeatedly phone both "home" and the HBE Community Association office, in vain: All phones in the area are out. No point in calling Uncle Cal and Aunt Liz in Virginia or Uncle Ray and Aunt Mattie in Delaware yet, who're no doubt making the same anxious, fruitless inquiries; soon enough they'll be phoning me, to hear what I've learned of Mom and Dad's situation. It occurs to me to try the offices of the *Avon County News* in Stratford, or maybe just hop the next flight to Baltimore/Washington International, rent a car, and get my butt over the Bay Bridge to HBE, since no matter what my parents' fate, I ought surely to be there to aid and comfort them, pick up the pieces, whatever. But—paralyzed, maybe, by some combination of anxiety, denial, anticipatory grief, self-pity, and who knows what else—to my own dismay I find myself staying put for a day, and then another and another. I turn off my phone-answering machine and decline even to answer the caller-ID'd attempts of aunts, uncles, and others to reach me, with whatever tidings, though for all I know some of the *unidentified* calls could be from my folks themselves, reassuring me that they're safe somewhere but needing my help. I go through the motions of my work, my "life," steering clear of the few officemates and "friends" who know where I grew up (i.e., in Stratford, back before HBE was built) and who might be wondering ...

Nay, more, now that I think of it: I find myself staying put in the little apartment that I share with a ten-gallon tropical-fish tank and a past-its-prime computer and *losing* my fucked-up self in what I've long wished, to no avail, had been my true vocation, the writing not of interoffice memos but of serious-type fiction stories. Like maybe one about an only-child daughter who, coming to realize that she's a lez, leaves small-town Maryland after high school, goes to university somewhere Midwest, and returns thereafter only for dutiful visits to

her parents—unlike the tale's author, who never left "home" but often wishes she had, instead of winding up as a sexless spinster in an entry-level Egret's Crest condo partly financed by her folks and miraculously spared by Giorgio's tornado. A tornado that never actually occurred, it occurs to her to imagine, except in her heartbroken, wish-granting imagination—wherein, while she's at it, she fancies that she's only *fancying* that she "stayed behind" in Avon County! Or, on the contrary, that she long ago left it and never moved back ...

Thus do I find myself by losing myself: While the directors of Tidewater Communities, Inc., at their next board meeting, observe a moment's silence in honor of their late colleague and his Mrs., and then debate the pros and cons of rebuilding Heron Bay Estates—weighing the projected (and environmentally ruinous) ongoing population surge in the Chesapeake Bay region against the recent nationwide slump in new and existing home sales and the predicted hyperactive hurricane seasons, with their attendant steep hikes in H.O. and flood-insurance premiums—"I" invent a pleasant, "eco-sensitive" gated community called Heron Bay Estates, replete with a natural preserve, recreational facilities, good neighbors and Peeping Toms, toga parties and progressive dinners, neighborhood- and community-association meetings, house renovations and teardowns, adulteries and suicides—the works. Sometimes I almost get to thinking that the place is real, or used to be; even that *I* am, or once was. Other times, that I dreamed both of us up, or anyhow that *somebody* did.

In whichever case (as happens), B followed A, and C B, et seq., each perhaps the effect, at least in part, of it's predecessors, until ...

Rebeginning

WHERE IN THE WORLD to begin, and how? Maybe with something like *In the beginning, Something-or-Other created Creation* —including what became our local galaxy and solar system ...

On whose third-from-the-sun planet, a primordial land mass divided over the eons into a clutch of continents ...

Along the eastern coast of one of which (named "North America" by a certain subset of an animal genus that evolved together with the geography), the of-and-on glaciations and other geological morphings developed that particular planet's largest estuarine system—called "Chesapeake Bay" by the "English" colonizers who displaced it's aboriginal human settlers after appropriating many of their place names along with their place ...

Which those newcomers then named "Maryland" ...

In what their descendants would call "the USA" ...

And lo, on the "Eastern Shore" of this same river-intricated Bay, near the small college town of "Stratford" in ever-less-rural "Avon County," an enterprising outfit trade-named "Tidewater Communities, Inc." developed in the "1980s" a soon-thriving gated community called by it's developers "Heron Bay Estates" ...

Which project prospered just long enough for it's thousand-and-some inhabitants to begin to feel that their variously laid out and well-shrubberied neighborhoods constituted not only a successful residential development but a genuine community ...

Until, a mere two dozen years after it's inception, that development was all but totally flattened in fewer than two dozen minutes by an F3-plus tornado, rare for these parts, spun off from an ever-less-rare tropical storm—the one called "Giorgio," in the "October" of "2006," during that year's annual hurricane season—and here we refugee-survivors of that freak twister freaking *are*, and that's more than enough already of this strung-out, quote-mark and hyphen-laden blather, the signature stylistic affliction of Failed-Old-Fart Fictionist George I. Newett, emeritus professor of more-or-less-creative writing @ the above-alluded-to Stratford College, who here hands the figurative microphone to his former colleague and fellow displaced Heron Bay Estatesman Peter Simpson, just now clearing his throat to address the first postapocalyptic meeting of the Heron Bay Estates Community Association (HBECA, commonly pronounced "H-Becka"), convened *faute de mieux* in a StratColl chemistry lecture hall thanks to Chairperson Simpson's good offices as associate dean of said college

and open to all former residents of that former development. Your podium, Pete, and welcome to it: Rebegin, sir, *s.v.p.*!

"Yes, well," Dean Simpson said to the assembled—then paused to reclear his throat and adjust with experienced hand the microphone clamped to the lectern perched between lab sinks and Bunsen burners on the small auditorium's chemistry-demonstration rostrum: "Here we all are indeed—or *almost* all of us, anyhow, and thanks be for that!" He shook his balding but still handsome late-fiftyish head and sighed, then with one forefinger pushed up his rimless bifocals at the nose piece, smiled a tight-lipped smile, and continued: "And the question before us, obviously, is *Do we start over?* And if so, how?"

"Excuse me there, Pete," interrupted one of the six official neighborhood representatives seated together in the lecture hall's front row—plump Mark Matthews from Spartina Pointe, Heron Bay's once-most-upscale detached-house venue—"I say we oughta start over by starting this here *meeting* over, with a prayer of thanksgiving that even though Heron Bay Estates was wrecked, all but a couple of us survived to rebuild it."

"Amen to that," some fellow gruffed from an upper rear row—beefy-bossy old Chuck Becker, Pete saw it was, from Cattail Court, in his and Debbie's own much-missed Rockfish Reach neighborhood—and there were other murmurs of affirmation here and there in the well-filled hall. But "Objection," a woman's voice protested from elsewhere in the room—the Simpsons' friend and (former) neighbor Lisa Bergman: Dr. Dave the Dentist's wife and hygienist-partner, and HBECA's trim and self-possessed rep from their late lamented subdivision. "If we're going to bring Gee-dash-Dee into this meeting," she went on, "—which I'm personally opposed to doing?—then before we thank Him-slash-Her, at least let's ask Her-slash-Him to explain why He/ She killed George and Carol Walsh and wrecked all our houses, okay?"

"Hear hear!" agreed her swarthy-handsome husband and several others, including Pete's afore-mentioned Debbie, the Stratford poet-professor Amanda Todd, and *her* spouse, Yours Truly, the of-and-on Narrator of this rebegun Rebeginning. Enough present objected to the objection, however—both among the official representatives from what used to be HBE's Shad Run, Egret's Crest, Oyster Cove, Blue Crab Bight, et al., and among the general attendees of this ad hoc open meeting from those several neighborhoods—that Peter was obliged to restore order by tapping on the microphone before proposing that in the interests of all parties, a few moments' silence be observed

forthwith, during which those inclined to thank or supplicate the deity of their choice would be free to do so, and the others to reflect as they saw fit upon the loss of their homes and possessions and the survival of their persons. "All in favor please raise your hands. Opposed? Motion carried: Half a minute's silence here declared, in memory of our late good neighbors the Walshes and our much-missed Heron Bay Estates."

While all hands prayed, reflected, or merely fidgeted, their chairperson could pretty well tell who was doing what by raising his eyes while lowering his head, stroking his short-trimmed beard, and noting the lowered heads with *closed* eyes (Spartina Pointers Mark Matthews and his self-designated trophy wife, Mindy; Mark's investment-counseling protégé Joe Barnes from Rockfish Reach; and his afore-mentioned cheerleaders Chuck and Sandy Becker, among others), the defiantly raised heads and wide-open eyes (notably Pete's own wife, Debbie, of whom more anon; the afore-noted Bergmans; the weekly *Avon County News* columnist Gerald Frank from Shad Run; and us Newett/Todds, late of Blue Crab Bight), and other somewhere-betweeners like Pete himself (e.g., Joe Barnes's wife, Judy; Gerry Frank's Joan; the tirelessly upbeat party hosts Tom and Patsy Hardison from Annapolis and Rockfish Reach; and, somewhat surprisingly, the Oyster Cove expastor Matt Grauer, whose conversion from Methodist minister to educational consultant perhaps reflected some weakening of faith?). As Dean Pete makes his unofficial tally, your *pro tem* Narrator will take the opportunity to stretch this thirty-second Moment of Silence into a more extended patch of what in the trade we call Exposition before getting on with the business at hand and this story's Action, if any—rather like that other windbag, our Giorgio tornado, expanding it's few-minute life span into what seemed an eternity to us hapless and terrified HBEers huddled in our basements and walk-in closets while windows and skylights blew out and trees and walls came a-tumbling down.

Okay, okay: weak analogy; scratch it. But whether or not this Moment of Silence helps any present to decide where we go from here, both as individuals and as a community, there's no doubting that those other moments of horrifying wind-roar changed the lives of most of us who survived it (not to mention the Walsh couple who didn't) and of many others lucky enough to have been in Stratford or elsewhere at the time but unlucky enough to have lost their primary or secondary dwelling place.

E.g., in that latter category, those Matthewses, Mark and Mindy, whose weekend-and-vacation establishment—an imposing faux-

Georgian McMansion in Spartina Pointe—had scarcely been finished and landscaped when F3 all but wrecked it. The pair were over in Baltimore at the time, Mark in his downtown office at Lucas & Jones, LLC, whereof he is CEO, and his ex-secretary Mindy in their nearby harborfront penthouse condominium. Thanks to it's no-expense-spared construction, enough of their Heron Bay house remains standing to make it's restoration feasible, but for Mark the question is whether to rebuild at all in a community that may or may not follow suit, or to take what insurance money he can get, claim the rest as a casualty-loss tax deduction, clear the ruins, list the lot for sale, kiss HBE bye-bye, and build their *second* second home on higher ground somewhere less flood- and hurricane-vulnerable, like maybe the Hunt Valley horse country north of the city or the Allegheny hills of western Maryland. With their well-diversified equities portfolio, their Baltimore condo plus a couple of other "investment units" here and there, and a certain offshore account in the Cayman Islands, they're in no great pain. Indeed, for pert and upbeat Mindy the wreck of 211 Spartina Court is as much opportunity as setback: Long and hard as she'd worked with architect, designers, and decorators on that house's planning and construction—including radically changing it's original "design concept," at no small cost, from mission-style *hacienda grande* to Williamsburg colonial—they had enjoyed the finished product just long enough for her to wish that she'd done a few things differently: better *feng shui* in the floor plan, especially in the mansion's wings, and maybe one of those "infinite edge" swimming pools instead of the conventional raised coping right around. Something to be said for going back to Square One, maybe, whether with TCI in a redesigned and even better-amenitied Heron Bay or with some other architect/builder elsewhere ...

No such temptations for the Hardisons, among others: those prosperous, high-energy Annapolis lawyers whose Rockfish Reach *palazzo* was the second most expensive casualty of the storm. They want the *status quo ante* restored as quickly as possible, not only at their Loblolly Court address but in all of Heron Bay Estates, so that they can get back to their weekend golf and tennis, their costume parties, progressive dinners, and Chesapeake cruising on their forty-foot trawler yacht, *Plaintiff's Complaint*. While for the elderly Beckers (who have flown up from their winter retreat on Florida's Gulf Coast to attend this meeting), the question isn't whether to rebuild what had been their primary residence on Rockfish Reach's Cattail Court or to build or buy another elsewhere in the area, but whether instead to give up altogether their annual snowbird migrations between two houses, shift their primary domicile to state-income-tax-free Florida, and escape it's sweltering summer season on cruise ships, Elderhostel

tours, and such—including, for Sandy Becker especially, frequent Stratford revisits to keep in touch with her many Episcopal church and Heron Bay Club friends.

Nor any such options and luxurious dilemmas for us reasonably well-off but by no means wealthy Simpsons, Bergmans, Greens, Franks, and Newett/Todds, whose wrecked houses and ruined possessions were our *only* such, and who've been reduced to making shift as best we can in generally inadequate temporary lodgings—motel rooms, in some instances—in small-town Stratford while still reporting daily to our company workplaces, our college or other-school classrooms, or our improvised laptop-and-cell-phone "home" offices. For pity's sake, cry we, let's get old HBE up and running, however rudimentary it's resurrection! And the same goes in spades for those elderly widows and widowers like Rachel Broadus, Reba Smythe, and Matt Grauer, who had been managing well enough, all things considered, in their Shad Run condos or Oyster Cove villas, but are now renting unhappily like us or squatting with their grown children, and in either case wondering whether the time has come for them to pack it in as homeowners and shift across the Matahannock River to TCI's Bayview Manor Continuing Care Community.

End of overextended Exposition. Back to you, Peter?

"Okay," that ever-reasonable fellow declared to the assembled, glancing at his agenda notes and tapping the microphone again to end their memorial Moment of Silence: "Let's start again—which of course is this meeting's agenda exactly." Comradely grin; stroke of close-cut gray-black beard. "The questions are Where, and How, and To What Extent, and In What Order we do whatever we end up deciding to do." Sympathetic head-shake. "I quite understand that most of you have your hands as full as Debbie and I do, squatting in temporary quarters while we deal with insurance adjusters"—boos and hisses from here and there, not directed at the speaker—"and scrabble around to make do while trying to keep up with our jobs and all. It's overwhelming! I want to emphasize that what each of you does with your damaged or destroyed property is entirely up to you, as long as you bear in mind HBE's covenant and building codes. All rebuilding plans for detached houses need to be cleared with our Design Review Board, obviously, just as they were back when those neighborhoods were first built. The condominium and villa and coach-home communities we presume will be rebuilt pretty much as before—assuming they *are* rebuilt—by a general contractor selected by each of the neighborhood associations, and the plans passed along to H-Becka, whose unenviable job it'll be to coordinate and monitor the several projects. Reconstruction of the

Heron Bay Club and the Marina Club and piers will be up to each one's board of governors, subject to the same review protocols. And TCI, I'm happy to report, will be standing by to advise and consult on HBE's infrastructure and on any changes we may want to make in it's overall layout—even though it's our baby these days, not it's original developer's."

He paused, glanced around the hall, readjusted his eyeglasses, and returned to his notes. "I know that several of you have ideas and proposals for a 'new' [*finger quotes*] Heron Bay Estates, while others of you would be more than content to have things put back as much as possible the way they were before. It's important for you to understand that this meeting is for *preliminary input only*, not for any final decisions. And some kinds of things can be put off till we get our homes rebuilt and reoccupied—may the day come soon! But even in that department there may be some suggestions that we ought to be considering as we plan our repairs and reconstruction. So the floor's open, folks: We'll make note of any and all proposals, talk 'em over in committee, and report back to you at our next open meeting. Let me remind you that you can also make written suggestions and comments on the H-Becka website." Smile of invitation. "Who wants to go first?"

Several hands went up at once, among the neighborhood representatives (my wife's, for one) and in the general audience (among them, mine). Before the chair could call on any, however, Mark Matthews heaved to his feet, turned his ample dark-suited back to Peter Simpson, and loudly addressed the hall: "Friends and neighbors! Mark Matthews here, from Spartina Pointe and the Baltimore office of Lucas and Jones—an outfit that knows a thing or two about turning setbacks into opportunities, as Joe Barnes yonder, from our Stratford office, can testify. Am I right, Joe and Judy?"

In a fake darkie accent, "Yassuh, boss," the male of that couple called back. A few people chuckled; his wife, sitting beside him, did not. Nor did Pete, who raised his eyebrows and stroked his chin but evidently decided not to interrupt, at least for the moment, this interruption of normal meeting procedure.

"Now, then! Mindy and I personally haven't made up our minds yet whether or not to rebuild our Spartina Court place, but I can tell you this, folks: The current downturn in the housing market—all those contractors hungry for work?—is such a golden opportunity for all hands present that if TCI isn't interested, Charlie Becker and I might just get into the construction racket ourselves! You with me there, Chuck?"

That elderly Becker (in fact the retired CEO of a Delaware construction firm) grinned and cocked his white-haired head as if

considering the suggestion. And "Hear hear!" duly seconded Joe Barnes.

"But if we do," Matthews went on, "it won't be just to get back to where we were. No sirree! It'll be to build a *bigger and better* Heron Bay Estates! And here's how." Raising his stout right thumb: "First of, we buy us a couple hundred more acres of cornfields and woodlots, either next door or across the highway or both, for an *HBE Phase Two!*" Now his thick forefinger: "Then we build us a couple more mid-rise-or-higher condominium complexes and detached-house neighborhoods—to *raise our base*, know what I mean?" Middle finger: "Plus we build ourselves an Olympic-size *indoor* pool and spa complex at the Club to use in the cooler months, and maybe even a second golf course on some of that useless preserve acreage of ours that just *sits* there. Et cetera et cetera: a whole new ball game!"

Tom Hardison it was, for a change, who said, "Sounds about right to me, Mark." Joe Barnes, of course, echoed assent, and there were approving or at least worth-considering nods from Chuck Becker and Stratford realtor Jeff Pitt as Matthews, clearly much pleased with himself, plumped back into his seat and beamed almost defiantly up at Peter Simpson. But "It sure sounds anything but right to *me*," my Amanda objected, also rising as if to address the gathering at large, but then turning to the podium: "However, instead of just grabbing the floor, I'll ask the chair's permission before I sound of."

Obviously welcoming the return to parliamentary procedure, "Permission granted," Simpson said at once. "Let's hear what you have to say, Amanda."

In her firm but gentle professorial voice, "What I have to say," she declared to the assembly, "is just about a hundred and eighty degrees from what you've just heard." Tucking a lock of gray-brown hair behind her ear, she smiled down at Matthews, who appeared to be studying the spread fingers of his left hand. "I agree with Mark that the catastrophe we-all have suffered can be turned into an opportunity. But in my opinion—and I'm not alone in this—what it's an opportunity *for* is not to *destroy* our precious preserve land and adjacent acreage and grow bigger-bigger-bigger, like too many already-overweight Americans—"

"*Objection*," Mark Matthews complained, and seemed about to rise again from his seat, but didn't.

"Noted but overruled, Mark," Peter declared, and nodded to Amanda to continue.

"Let's imagine instead a very *different* kind of Heron Bay makeover," my wife proposed. "Given what we all know the future has in store for us with global warming and such, and the critical

importance of reducing our carbon emissions and foreign-oil dependency, here's our chance to make HBE a model 'green' community!" The adjective in finger quotes. "Solar panels on every building, plus whatever other energy-saving technologies we can deploy—expensive to start with, but they soon pay for themselves in lower utility bills, and what's bad news for Delmarva Power and Light is good news for the environment. *Fewer* grass areas to be fertilized and irrigated, instead of more; *more* preserve instead of less, and natural 'xericulture' landscaping wherever possible, instead of high-maintenance flower beds and shrubbery. Energy-efficient houses and condos, and propane-powered shuttle buses to Stratford and back every hour, like the ones they use in some of our national parks, to cut down on gasoline consumption and car-exhaust emissions every time we need to get into town. What an example we could set for twenty-first-century America!"

"I'll second that," called Debbie Simpson.

"And I'll third it," added Joan Frank. "We might just want to reconsider the whole gated-community concept too, while we're at it, as Mandy suggested last year."

"Whoa-ho-ho!" Jeff Pitt protested, rising from his seat in the audience and, like Mark, not waiting for acknowledgment from the chair: "Excuse me, ladies, but you take this tree-hugging stuff far enough and next thing we know you'll be telling us to donate the whole shebang to the Nature Conservancy instead of rebuilding at all!"

Uneasy chuckles here and there. Unfazed, "Don't think I haven't considered that option, Jeff," Amanda replied: "Collect our insurance payouts and take our casualty-loss deductions and then buy or build in an already-existing population center like Stratford: smart growth instead of suburban sprawl! But I'm trying to be less radical than that: We keep our entry gates and our golf course; we rebuild our beautiful Heron Bay Estates and even keep that pretentious last word of it's name, if that's what most of us want; but we rebuild it more green and eco-friendly, for our own good as well as the planet's! Thank you all for hearing me out."

Your Narrator applauded, proud as usual of his spunky mate, though disinclined to go quite so far as she in the extreme-makeover way. What *I'd* settle for, frankly, at my age and stage, is to be back with my dear high-mileage Apple desktop in my snug little study in our snug little coach home in HBE's snug little Blue Crab Bight subdivision exactly as it was before Mister Twister hit the Delete button, pecking away my Old-Fart-Emeritus autumn mornings at yet another rambling prose piece while Amanda, in *her* snug little et cetera, invokes the Muse of Less-Than-Immortal Versifiers but Damned

Good Teachers to see her through yet another StratColl.edu semester or three before she joins her gin-and-tonic-slurping mate out in the pasture. Yes indeedy, Cap'n Gawd: Get us back Just Where & As We Were, Sir, *s.V.p.*—rolling our fortune-favored eyes at the word "Estates" and the 24/7 entrance gates and security patrols in our all-but-crime-free neck of the tidewater Maryland woods; tscking our liberal tongues at the U.S. fiasco in Iraq and at sundry other disasters around the world; shaking our snotty-intellectual heads at our community's toga parties and old-fashioned socials while at the same time quite enjoying them.

O bliss!

But no such luck, of course. Fabulator though G. I. Newett by vocation may willy-nilly be, the subject of these present fumbling fabulations is (anyhow *was*) a subdivision of the Real World—wherein, as Reader may have had occasion to note, nothing once truly whacked is ever quite restorable to What It Was Before. Best one can do is bid Mister Chairperson to tap the old microphone/gavel and proceed with our proceedings. Okay, Pete?

"Okay," declared Peter Simpson, and did just that: tapped the mike and thanked Amanda for her input, which he pronounced most certainly worth serious consideration even by those who—like himself and no doubt numerous others present ("Not including my wife," he acknowledged with a small smile: "She's with *you*, Amanda")—inclined to a more conservative conservatism, so to speak: the reconstruction of Heron Bay Estates as expeditiously as possible and as close as possible to what it was before, perhaps with "green" enhancements where convenient and cost-effective. Reduced community-assessment fees, say, for energy-efficient and/or eco-sensitive building and landscape designs?

"Right on," somebody agreed—Gerry Frank, I'd guess, or Dave Bergman—and there was a general rustle of approbation in the hall. No need for motions and seconds, Pete reminded us, since this wasn't a formal meeting, just a sort of solidarity and opinion-gathering session for us lucky-but-hard-hit survivors. "Your neighborhood reps and I will be getting together as often as we can to review and approve rebuilding proposals from individual homeowners, as well as from the condo and villa and coach-home associations and the Club and Marina Club boards, and we'll green-light as many as we possibly can in keeping with HBE's covenant, using what we've heard from you today as our guidelines." Deep exhale; stroke of beard. "So: The floor's open now to any others who want to be heard."

A few more did, mainly to affirm one or another already-voiced position, after which the aspiring teller of this would-be tale took it upon himself to thank our Association chairman for his good offices on our behalf. "No call for that," Dean Pete modestly replied, gathering up his notes. And then, to the house, "On behalf of H-Becka, it's I who thank *you-all* for coming to this get-together and making your opinions known. We're all plenty stressed out, for sure. But one way or another, by George ..." As if just realizing what he'd said, he grinned meward. "One way or another, we'll *rebegin!*"

Yeah, right. And while we're about it, friends and neighbors, let's rebegin our derailed lives, okay? Taking a more or less alphabetical clutch of us as we've appeared in the *Faltering Fables* of G. I. Newett, let's have Sam Bailey's wife Ethel *not* die of cervical cancer this time around, so bereaving my old ex-colleague and Oyster Cove neighbor that he skewers himself (unsuccessfully) with a borrowed machete at the Hardisons' toga party in Rockfish Reach. Okay? And let those other RRers Dick and Susan Felton *not* feel so prematurely finished with their lives' prime time that they drive home from that same bloodily disrupted fest and off themselves with auto exhaust fumes in their garage, *sans* even a farewell note to their distant kids! Let good Pete and Debbie Simpson's daughter, Julie—their much-prized only child, on track to graduate from Johns Hopkins, go on to med school, and thence to service in some selfless outfit like Doctors Without Borders—*not* be car-crashed to death in her sophomore year by a drunken driver on the Baltimore Beltway, so traumatizing both parents (but Deb in particular) that they haven't enjoyed a truly happy hour in the several years since! Let George and Carol Walsh *not* be crushed to a bloody mush in the rubble of their house on Shoreside Drive (Rockfish Reach again) by that fucking five-minute F3 funnel-cloud! Et cetera? And while we're about all *that*, let's rebegin us Newett/Todds, making my Mandy this time around *not* merely an okay Poet + Damned Fine Teacher, but the Essential Lyric Voice of Early-Twenty-First-Century America + DFT!

And her husband?

Yes, well. *In the beginning* (that chap believes he was saying once upon a time) there was this place, this "development." There were these people: their actions, inactions, and interactions, their successes and failures, pleasures and pains, excitements and boredoms, in a particular historical time and geographical location. Nothing very

momentous or consequential in the larger scheme of things: one small tree-leaf in the historical forest, it's particular spring-summer-and-fall no doubt to be lost in Father Time's vast, ongoing deciduousity. But just as, now and then, one such leaf may happen against all odds to be noticed, picked up, and at least for some while preserved—between the leaves of a book, say—and may with luck outlast it's picker-upper as the book may outlast it's author and even it's serial possessors, so may this verbal approximation of the residential development called Heron Bay Estates and of sundry of it's inhabitants survive, by some fluke, that now-gone place and it's fast-going former denizens—whether or not it and they in some fashion "rebegin," and even if this feeble re-imagining them of, like the afore-invoked leaf-pressed leaf, itself sits pressed and scarcely noted in Papa T's endless, ever-growing library—

Or, more likely, his recycling bin.

—[Good]By[e] George I. Newett